

## **As It Should Have Been by L. Borealis**

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**Summary:** Mike Wheeler was certain that his entire life had been pushed in the wrong direction. Wrong college. Wrong state. Wrong future. Yet, through the presence of an unexpected pair of people, he's about to be proven completely wrong. Can Mike open his eyes to the world around him, and gain new love along the way? Note: contains spoilers from the book 'Stranger Things: Suspicious Minds'

## 1. Chapter 1

Hi Everybody! I got done with reading Suspicious Minds (the new Stranger Things book) a few days ago and I just HAD to explore the following tale once complete. A fair warning: this fic contains some light spoilers from the book, specifically in the introduction of one very important character, so if you still plan on reading the book I'd recommend doing so before you venture onward with this fic.

Now that fair warning is out of the way! I'd like to introduce you to my brand new fic which explores our dear Mileven "as it should have been". In a world without Brenner, a world without the lab, a world where Jane Rich, the unexpected yet totally loved daughter of Andrew and Terry Rich, was allowed to thrive in the way that life should have allowed.

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### September 1989

Mike sat in the stiff chair wondering if he should have waited outside. The secretary had waved him in, hadn't she? To be honest, he hadn't really been paying much attention. He was too fidgety and distracted to pay attention to much at all. His eyes darted around the foreign office, filled with personal effects of a person who was now three minutes late, if the off-kilter clock on the wall was reading the correct time.

The basics were there. Three degrees, mounted from bottom to top, a Bachelors, a Masters, and a Ph.D. Below them a cardboard box sat on the floor. Haphazard magazines peeked out, along with a seemingly broken desk lamp and a pair of ratty combat books that seemed too small for men's feet. The desk held the personal effects. Three framed photos stood in slight disorganization, pointing this way and that. Glimpses of a woman, a man, and a small girl in each of them. Candid shots. One at the beach, one at Disneyworld, and one clearly at a zoo with a zebra in the backdrop. Mike's eyes lingered a bit as he noticed the smiles. It looked like a happy family. Nothing at all like the stuffy posed veneer of the Wheeler family photos.

Eyes darting to the right, the source of his mood returning to his mind, Mike looked at the clock. 4 minutes late.

Mike let out a tight sigh. This should have been exciting! It was a new city. A new school. A new life filled with the potential for new opportunities. Yet, as he looked down at the printed schedule that had been handed to him by the secretary, his eyes zeroed in on the problem.

Sure, the classes looked right, or at least some of them did. It was the letterhead that felt all wrong. It didn't say MIT. Instead, it said something absolutely ridiculous: Indiana University.

Not that Mike had anything *wrong* with Indiana University. In and of itself, it was fine. That wasn't the problem. It was the long clinging grip of his father that reflected from the university's letters on the paper that made him frown.

Mike had never been shy about his college aspirations, and his applications had proven that. MIT, Brown, and so many others in between. He'd been successful, too. Acceptance letters had come from five schools. Yet, four of those schools had something in common: none of them came with a scholarship.

Indiana University, however? That damned acceptance letter came with a full ride scholarship.

At that moment, Mike knew his fate had been sealed. Ted Wheeler, an Indiana University alum himself, had refused to hear another word regarding college options once that letter had arrived in the mail.

Truthfully, Mike wished he had intercepted it at the door and thrown it away before his dad could've ever gotten his hands on it.

He'd tried to take solace in the fact that he would at least know someone. It was a silver lining, after all. Indiana University came with an obvious dorm mate. His longtime best friend, Will. It was something to lean on and he was trying to do his best, but he couldn't deny that this place, with the same green grass and the same types of trees and the same temperature in the air, simply felt like an

extension of Hawkins.

Boring suburbia had followed him with ease, despite his attempts to escape.

"Sorry, I'm late!" Mike startled as a friendly yet rushed voice cut from behind him into his thoughts. "Got too chatty at the coffee cart."

Mike spun around to face the man who was striding into the office. His first thought was odd and unexpected: Was this man even his advisor? He couldn't have been any older than in his late 30s or early 40s, cup of coffee in one hand and a pastry in the other, brown hair just a bit too long for professorial norms, his shirt sleeves unstarched and rolled up like he was home after a long day of work, even though it was only a little after 9am on a Monday on the first day of classes.

There was absolutely nothing stuffy about him. Nothing at all.

He kicked his chair lightly to make it swivel for easy access, dropping his pastry on the desk as he looked up and caught Mike's eyes with easy attention.

"Have you seen A Fish Called Wanda yet?"

"Um..." Mike stuttered, completely taken aback, "I saw it last weekend? John Cleese... um... he's hilarious."

"Right?!" the man exclaimed, dropping into his seat, "My daughter dragged me. I didn't think I'd like it, but you can't say no to your kid, right? She was right though. It was great. Anyway, that's what I got stuck talking about with the coffee girl. Bad excuse. Michael Wheeler, right?"

"Yes?"

"Well, I'm Professor Rich," he said, wiping his pastry hand on a napkin in a hurried fashion before he reached out and offered Mike a handshake, "but if you see me outside of campus, please call me Andrew. I'd prefer you don't out me as a nerdy academic in public."

That got a laugh out of Mike and, if he'd been aware, it melted a bit of the nervous tensions that had been winding up his shoulders.

"Okay. Well, welcome to IU, Michael. We've got..." he turned around and squinted toward the clock, "...11 minutes to talk about your future. Doesn't seem like enough time. How are you liking it here so far?"

"It's... it's fine." Mike said, trying his best to put on a positive face. "I've only seen the dorm so far, but so far so good."

"Which dorm are you in?"

"Lancaster."

"Oh, you got lucky," Professor Rich said with a groan, "I was in Monroe my freshmen year before I convinced my parents to let me live off campus. Nightmare. What about your classes? How do you feel about your schedule?"

"It's... they're fine? I think," Mike replied, handing his schedule to the professor across the desk.

Professor Rich plucked it out of Mike's fingers and took a look, "'It's fine? I think' doesn't sound like it's actually fine. What don't you like about it?"

Mike wasn't sure what the hell possessed him to answer honestly, but the truth slid easily off of his tongue, "My dad made the schedule."

"Ohhhhh," Professor Rich replied with an understanding tone. He reached for a red pen at the edge of his desk and pulled the cap off with his teeth, looking up to Mike as he did so. "What do you want to change about it?"

Mike's world stopped at his words. "Really?"

Professor Rich regarded Mike for a moment, "Michael, I think I've seen your file. You're here on a full ride, right?"

"Yes?"

"Well then, I'd say you've earned the right for this schedule to reflect whatever *you* want. Your prior academic performance paid for this. So, what do you want to change?"

Mike's jaw was on the floor. The words pounded in his ears like a drum that had been there for months but he had only just heard.

Professor Rich was right.

Conspiratorial grin rising to Mike's lips, he pulled his chair closer to the desk and leaned in over the schedule, "My dad is going to kill me if I change this," he moaned as he pushed his shaggy dark hair out of his eyes.

Professor Rich chuckled, "If he has any issues have him call me. I revel in helping parents understand that its time to loosen the reins." He had leaned forward as he talked, red pen in his hand seeming to carry so much weight that its presence hovering over the print made Mike's stomach tight. "Okay, so let's start with the major," he said, tapping his pen against the top three classes on the schedule, "Do you actually *want* to major in mechanical engineering? I promise I won't be offended if you say no, even though you'll be taking about a third of your classes with me."

"No, I mean um... yeah," Mike stumbled, "That's actually what I wanted to major in. That part is right."

"Great, so we'll leave those classes alone." His eyes scanned down the paper. "So, that leaves Intro to Business, Poly Sci 101 and Business Theory. How do you feel about those?"

Mike snorted, "You want my honest answer?"

"That's what we're doing here."

"Sounds like a nightmare."

"Okay then," Professor Rich said, making red ticks beside each class, "What would you like to fill them with instead?"

"Really?" Mike said breathlessly, "Creative writing. I want to double major."

"Ah," Professor Rich replied with a knowing look, "So that's where dad stepped in?"

Mike rolled his eyes, "Obviously."

"Well, you'll have to start with introductory English classes. What do you like to write?"

"Fantasy, mostly."

Professor Rich looked up, his eyes suddenly bright. "Cool! Like Lord of the Rings?"

*Had his college advisor just said 'cool'? Had he just mentioned Mike's favorite books?*

He couldn't believe how much his luck had turned around.

"Yes! Exactly."

Professor Rich smirked as his pen made contact with the paper once again, "I had a hunch I liked you from the moment I laid eyes on you." He crossed out Intro to Business and Business Theory as he spoke, Mike's chest feeling lighter with each damning stroke. "Lets kick these two business classes off the list, then. I can probably still get you into Professor Lyle's English 101. He'd be a good fit for you. He's got a soft spot for the same genre. And Intro to Creative Writing. We might have to sweet talk you into that one, but I bet we can make it happen. I've got some special connections in English admissions. Sound good?"

Mike forced the words off of his dry and shocked tongue. "Th... that sounds amazing."

He nodded and scribbled in the changes, cross referencing the class roster beside him as he did so. Finally, he looked up, his pen stopping on the final class. Poly Sci 101.

"Can I give you one piece of advice, Michael?"

"Sure."

"Keep Poly Sci." He slid the document back across the table toward Mike and capped his pen. "It'll be good information to know if you want to do creative writing. Plus, I wouldn't be surprised if that

choice on your father's part might backfire on him."

"What?"

"Oh, nothing," Professor Rich said, clearly amused with himself. He leaned back in his chair and picked up his pastry, peeling at the top sugary flakes, but keeping his eyes on Mike throughout it all, "You need anything else?"

"No," Mike said, a smile slipping to his lips in a foreign sensation, "You did... this is... this is amazing. *Thank you.*"

"Don't mention it. It's my job to make sure you're on the right track, and I think that's what we did here. Looks like I'll be seeing you on Tuesdays and Thursdays for Principals of Design. That'll be a fun class, as far as boring classes with six hundred pages of reading goes. Go hand this to Tracy at the desk, along with this note," he scrawled on a new sheet of paper and handed it to him, "She'll put in the request for the class changes. Should only take ten or fifteen minutes. Do you have the time to wait?"

"Yeah, I don't have my first class until ten."

"Great. Well, Michael - "

" - Oh, it's Mike."

"Okay, Mike. Since I've got you in class, feel free to stop me before or after if you need more advisory time. Or, I have Tuesday office hours from 4-6pm, but I usually use that time to secretly catch up on my own fantasy book addiction, so interrupt me before or after our class."

Mike chuckled, "You got it. Thank you. Really, *thank you.* I'll uh, I'll see you tomorrow."

Mike sat in the lobby for a total of ten minutes, his nerves jangling with a fresh cocktail of sensations: relief, excitement, and an odd and thrilling sense of rebellion. The office seemed to have some sway in the English department, because Mike was able to get both of the classes without much fight.

His new creative writing-injected schedule in hand, Mike made his

way across campus to his first class of the semester, his nerves ratcheting back up a few notches as he accepted which class it was. Poly sci.

Honestly, it had been the class that Mike had been dreading the most. Politics had never really been his thing. The droning of the nightly news coupled with his dad's approving hums and criticisms had been the main bulk of his exposure, after all. Maybe it would be worth his time? Hard to figure out how, though. Yet, Ted had been adamant about its importance.

*"You need to be educated in the comings and goings of the country, Michael. It's important that you stand for something."*

*"You mean it's important that I stand for what **you** stand for,'* he had almost retorted that day, though he had bit his tongue.

Hurrying along as the minutes ticked quickly away, he took long strides up three flights of stairs within one of the oldest buildings on Indiana University's campus. He made his way to the third floor and eyed the doors as he walked down the main hall, each number growing closer to his destination, room 353.

At the threshold of the door, a fresh wave of nervousness yelped within him. It was a surprisingly small classroom, and odd. The chairs had been arranged, fourteen in total, pointing in a circle.

*Oh god.*

...It was a discussion class...

...A discussion class about a topic that Mike knew almost nothing about.

His sense of self shrank within his stomach, and he jostled between two chairs as it did so, taking a seat a little too clumsily, a little too loud. A few people already in the circle looked up in surprise as his commotion. Cheeks flaring in a way that made him want to die, he looked up to see how much of a scene he had made.

Most of the eyes dropped from him in an instant, but for one pair. And when he met them, his blush doubled.

*She was beautiful.*

She sat directly across from him in the circle. Wild wavy brown hair, natural and devoid of the chemical products that wreaked havoc on all hair in 1988, fell softly with a tad bit of muss against her shoulders, touching against a slightly baggy pink t-shirt with a wide stretched neck. She seemed comfortable in slouchy overalls, rolled at the cuffs and hanging in loose denim clumps at the middle of her shin. Scuffed and well worn cherry red chucks peeked out below. They bounced from the movement of her foot.

*Oh fuck.*

He had just checked this girl out, completely, head to toe.

Wincing, Mike drew his eyes back up. Past her purple chipped nails and the ratty backpack in her lap, to her eyes. Hazel brown with the slightest bit of green shining in the sunlight. Her gaze still locked resolutely on him.

Shame froze him, the awkwardness strong enough to make him want to drop straight out of school before the first class had even started. It was then that she smirked, her eyes finally letting him free as they slipped from his and seemed to search for a location to look at that was anywhere else but on him.

*Welp, he could die now. That'd probably be for the best.*

"Looks like everyone is here on time. That's nice, too bad it won't last."

The middle aged man's voice called up from the back of the classroom. He stood up from where he had been perched against a short bookcase and walked toward the circle and took the final empty chair. He was a classic teacher, much more aligned with Mike's stereotyped view than Professor Rich had been a few minutes prior. He pushed up his wire rimmed glasses, pushed back his thinning hair, and straightened his sweater vest over a crisp light blue oxford shirt as he spoke.

"Welcome to intro to political science. I hope we can end this

semester with all of you having a better grasp upon the world around you and the machinations that make it move. I'll only do roll call today. Everyone pay attention because you'll be spending a lot of time talking in this circle. It's good to know each other's names. It keeps the bloodiest arguments at bay. Caitlyn..."

Mike looked down at his hands to find them trying to rip each other apart. His fingers picked at his nails in supreme fidgety nervousness. He attempted to pull his focused in order to follow the names and faces as the professor called them around the room.

Mia ...

...Robert...

...Jane...

"Present."

Mike's eyes traced back to the girl across from him. She raised one finger in the air as she spoke, and then leaned back casually into her chair. Her fingers entered her hair, combing the strands back into a ball that she bunched up within a plastic accordion-like tie that had been around her wrist.

"Ahem - Michael?"

Mike blinked, the sound of all three attempts to get his attention blaring in his ear all at once. Jane's eyes were on his once again with some kind of baffled amusement.

"Um, yeah," he said, wrenching his eyes from her. "Here."

"I can see that," the professor said, unamused. "Moving on. I'm Professor Barnes. For the next semester we'll be exploring the ins and outs of political discourse. We will be covering history, current events, and theory. This class will be taught discussion style, so if you are a person who is attached to your books and tests, take this process as a learning experience. We will have two tests that will account for 30% of your grade. A partnered project later in the semester will also account for 30%. That remaining 40%? That is contingent on your attendance and participation in our discussions.

And with that out of the way, let's get started." A slightly evil grin painted itself upon Professor Barnes's face as he leaned forward on his knees and regarded the circle. "Let's start off with a little get to you know. An ice breaker, if you will. See where we all stand; where the demographics of this class lie. I'll just throw this in the middle. The merits and demerits of the War on Drugs."

The scoff across from him was instant, like whiplash. And for the third time in 5 minutes Mike found his eyes drift back to the girl, Jane, right as she opened her mouth.

"Ridiculous. Absolutely useless policy."

"Care to elaborate?"

It seemed that she, if fact, *did* care to elaborate. She straightened as she looked back at the professor with an overwhelming sense of confidence, "The war on drugs is a corrupt attempt to control the masses. Even in its most generous reading, it's not working as intended. It's starting to show itself as a scape goat policy in order to racially profile minorities."

Her eyes were tight as she talked, arms crossed over her chest as though she was protecting the next wave of evidence in case she needed it.

"Anyone else care to chime in?" the Professor asked, looking around the room.

Mike surely didn't care to chime in. He had never thought about the War on Drugs once in his life, and he didn't seem to be the only one. The whole class seemed wide eyed, staring in Jane's direction as though they were waiting for her to give them the answer.

"I'd love to smoke weed but they're making a really big bummer out of that. So, I'm with that girl," some beefy guy with thin blonde said on Mike's right said.

The class snickered in reply.

"I think it's good policy," a prim girl with permed red hair said, next to Jane. Jane whipped around, her brow furrowing in the girl's

direction. The girl shrunk beneath Jane's pressing gaze, but she pushed forward nonetheless. "It's uh. I mean, Drugs are bad and dangerous. They can kill you. And it's not just that, President Reagan made it really clear that drugs were bad for national security."

Jane snorted, "You're going to base your opinion on what *Reagan* thought?"

"What was wrong with Reagan?"

Mike almost gasped.

That had been his voice. Oh God, those had been his words, coming off of his lips.

The second the question slipped from Mike's lips he knew he'd fucked up, for Jane's attention darted to him with an intensity that made him certain that she could snap his neck with nothing more than her eyes if she wanted to.

"Did you really just ask that question?" Mike gulped as Jane unfolded herself from the chair, leaned forward on her knees like a mechanic at a bar, and stared right into his eyes. She dramatically titled her head and scratched her chin. "Let's see? Hmm. What's wrong with Reagan? Oh, how about the fact that he not only continued the American war machine after Vietnam, but he ramped it up to the point that he was selling weapons to *both* sides of a war, one of which was on an embargo? Or, how about the fact that he was totally fine with overthrowing the leaders of democratically elected governments using American force? Or maybe the blood of thousands of gay men that he has on his hands for doing absolutely nothing about the AIDS crisis. You know, basically treating them like they were dispensable despite the fact that they're, I don't know, Americans? *And* human beings? What's wrong with Reagan? A lot. A lot is wrong with Reagan. I could definitely keep going but is that good enough for you?"

Mike, a lost naïve deer in headlights, tongue stuck dry to his mouth, simply nodded back to her.

Two things were clear:

1. Ronald Reagan, the man his father had practically worshipped all throughout his childhood, was a complete monster if what Jane had said was true.
2. Jane. Jane was the most intimidating girl he had ever met in his life.

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*What a shame*, Jane thought as she looked the guy right in the eye and absolutely grilled him.

*He had to fucking like Reagan.*

Such a shame. He was cute.

*Really cute.*

So cute that she hadn't even minded all that much when he'd spent a very disrespectful amount of time checking her out.

She'd noticed him the second he'd walked in. There was something about his hesitancy that her eyes had been drawn to. Lanky and shy-eyed, draped in a threadbare blue hoodie, open, showing a simple dusty blue ring-necked t-shirt beneath. The colors all worked to make it seem like his pale skin glowed. He had fidgeted as he sat, clearly uncomfortable, and she'd felt for him.

Not that she knew what that felt like. Not here, at least.

Nothing felt out of her comfort zone at Indiana University. It had been her backyard for as long as she could have remembered. The green lawns had served as the location of her first steps as she played on a picnic blanket with her mom, waiting for her dad to get finished with classes for his master's degree. Her first successful bike ride with her dad had been on the sidewalks outside the building where her mom was finally beginning to finish her own degree with summer classes while her dad was on leave from his adjunct position before he'd gone tenure track.

Nothing about this place was foreign. The halls, the faces, the mentality? It had always been in her blood.

This guy, however. This Michael, as she'd learned from roll call, he didn't seem to have the same comfort. Far from it. Maybe that was why she hadn't felt the same raise of her feminist hackles at the attention he'd laid on her. He *had* seemed to have the decency to look embarrassed the one, or two, times she'd caught him staring.

That part was easy to forgive.

A comment like "What was wrong with Reagan," however? That was *not* easy to forgive. In fact, that was an instant deal breaker.

Maybe it was unfair, but that one comment had easily slipped him into a mold: Boring rich boy who had never had a unique thought in his life. Forgettable.

Didn't matter how cute he was.

Moving on.

The conversation continued around her, eyes from her classmates slipping to her every time someone talked for fear that she'd go after *them* next, but they were all lucky, for she had expended so much energy in her full throated rebuke of old Ronald that she felt done for the day. The class bled on quickly, poorly thought out and regurgitated from their parents opinion followed by an equally poorly thought out and regurgitated from their parents opinion.

The professor interrupted the conversation after about 40 minutes of simply sitting there and letting uneducated freshman babble about drugs and the government. "Okay, looks like this will be a fun and interesting class. Wednesday we'll begin our work in theory. See you all then."

Jane collected her things, stuffed them into her bag, and stood up, her eyes involuntarily sliding one last time toward Michael as he pulled his bag on. He puffed his shaggy dark hair out of his eyes as he situated his backpack, looking up and catching her attention with surprise.

It was so absolutely unfair how pretty his eyes were.

She quickly looked away and made her way out of the class.

*He likes Reagan, she reminded herself silently, he's off limits.*

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Mike was incredibly relieved to find the interior of his dorm room. Freshly applied posters and drawings by Will were up on the walls, making it feel something like their new home. Will was curled up in the corner of his bed working on a drawing.

"Hey," he mumbled, not looking up, "how was your first day?"

"Better than expected." Mike dropped his bag by the foot of his new desk and stretched as he walked toward his bed. "My advisor is awesome and seems to dislike authority so he helped me change my business classes to creative writing."

Will's eyes whipped up in surprise. "That's great! Oh, your dad is going to be pissed."

Mike snorted and dropped to his bed, the springy mattress bouncing him as he fell, "Sure, but Professor Rich pointed out that since I got a full ride my dad doesn't really have a say. I feel like an idiot that I didn't really think about that. So when the fight happens I'll have that in my back pocket."

"Oh man, good point. Good classes?"

"Creative writing seems like it'll be good, yeah? But Poly-sci? Oh my god, it's terrifying." It bubbled back up within him then, his terrible interaction from the morning. It had taken him hours to shake it off and it had re-arisen with just as much discomfort. "I'm pretty sure I made an enemy. This girl completely grilled me for about five minutes in front of the whole class for not hating Reagan."

Will's eyes flattened. His pencil dropped to his side. "You defended Reagan?"

"I didn't know!"

"Okay, that's fair," Will conceded, "You *have* only been out of your dad's house for what, five days? Well, she was right about that. Reagan was a nightmare."

Mike let his head fall back into his pillow, "Why didn't anyone say anything when he was president?"

"They did! Just not when they were around your family."

Mike looked up to his friend, a sudden flare of shame spiking his chest for his ignorance, "Did he really stop funding for AIDS research?"

"Oh yeah," Will said with a sigh, "And it's still happening under Bush. It sucks. They don't see gay people as worth the money."

"That's... Man, that's so fucked up."

"Yeah, it is." Will looked up at that point, a new look in his eye. A little bit of nervousness. "Speaking of, or... um... hey, can I get your opinion on something?"

"Of course."

"I uh..." he twirled the colored pencil quickly between his fingers, his eyes dropping back to his drawing, "I want to be out here."

"Out where?"

"No. *Out*. Here. I want to be out. Here at college."

Mike's eyes widened. "Oh."

"I was thinking about it all summer but I wasn't sure. But I mean, mom and Jonathan both know now. And you guys all know. I don't know, I'm just sick of feeling like I'm hiding a part of myself and... this just feels like a safe place to try it out. New life, new choices. You know?" Will bit his lip, "But I understand that might, you know since we live together, put you in danger."

"How so?"

"Because you'll be living with -" Will rolled his eyes as his fingers marked quotations, "- 'a fag'. It might put attention on you or make you unsafe and I just, I wanted to let you know before I did anything. You know, in case you wanted me to wait until we could live in

separate places or – "

"Will!" Mike interrupted immediately, holding his hand up for Will to stop, "Hell no! If you want to be out, be out. Don't worry about me. I've got a pretty thick skin when it comes to being bullied. Not like it ever stopped."

"You're sure?" Will asked hesitantly.

Mike nodded fervently, "I'm completely sure. Don't take me into account on how you want to live your life. I'm proud of you."

"Thanks, Mike," Will said, the nervousness leaving his smile. "I think I'm going to go to the Gay and Lesbian Alliance meeting tonight. I might not stay. I just to check it out. See if it would be a good thing to do, you know?"

"That's awesome," Mike replied, a bubble of resilient pride blooming in his chest for his best friend. "That's a great idea."

"Yeah," Will groaned, "I'm nervous though. I've never been in a room where people just *expect* me to be gay *and* be okay with it. You know? I mean, I've been in a lot of rooms where people expect me to be gay and they're *not* okay with it. But this? I don't know. I'm just nervous."

"I get that," Mike said, "But think about it. You're going to be in a room with a bunch of people who've had similar experiences to you, for the first time. And a lot of them, if they're freshmen too, are probably going to be feeling the same way. Plus, you'll probably get tons of dates out of it."

"Oh man, I don't know if I'm ready for that," Will said with a chuckle as he turned back to his drawing. "Thanks for being cool with it, though."

"Will, you're my best friend. What you want is way more important to me than some unknown piece of shit homophobic bullies. You didn't need to ask." Mike stretched out on his bed and let the final tension of the day bleed into the mattress. "Do you want to go to the cafeteria? I can't stop thinking about the fact that they have an ice

cream machine there as part of our meal plan."

"Yeah, that sounds good," Will agreed, shuffling carefully to collect his art supplies from his bed, "My hand is cramping. I could use a break from this."

Mike and Will chatted about their first day as they walked to the cafeteria in the building next to theirs. It all felt normal for a minute as they rehashed their days. The places they'd gotten lost, the assholes and potentially nice people in their classes, the professors. All the normal things. With Will at his side, just as he had been since their first day of school when they were five years old, the campus felt a little bit less foreign, just a little bit more normal. Maybe, just maybe, Mike might learn to not completely hate this place.

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"My little girl just had her first day of college and I cannot wait to hear how it went!"

Jane groaned, rolling her eyes as she looked up from the first chapter of her gender theory book, which she was reading for leisure.

It was hard to believe that this day was different in any way. It felt like every other moment in her life. She found herself sitting in her threadbare chair in the corner of the living room where she always was, curled up with her book as her dad came home, just like normal. The crack of the single beer that he drank every night after work echoed off the walls just like normal. He dropped lazily down onto the couch, just like normal.

However, today *was* different. For today they had both been at the same place: Indiana University.

Jane probably should've been across the street at her dorm, but it felt a little out of place when her own bedroom was only one block away, filled with her life and her comforts. So, almost by habit, she found herself wandering home to her parents' house to sit in her own chair with her own cup of tea, in order to read her new book in peace.

"I'm starving," her dad called from the kitchen, "All I ate today was a single pastry. Advisory meetings kept me chained to my desk. Want

to make a frozen pizza? Mom won't be home for another hour so we can sneak it in before she can stop us."

"Since mom isn't here to stop us, can we add extra pepperonis and cheese?" she called, her stomach growling more from the idea of a treat than from hunger.

"Can we add extra pepperonis and cheese?" he scoffed dramatically, "Who do you think you're even talking to that you have to ask that? You couldn't stop it if you tried."

Jane laughed as she followed her dad's voice into the kitchen and found him unpacking the necessities from the fridge. He handed her the pizza while he pulled out the additional fixings.

"Tell me everything," her dad said as he worked, "Any classes you hate?"

"No," she replied, "I only had two today. Poly sci and gender studies."

"I am so happy they got that class approved," he said, "Linda worked really hard to push the board to add it."

"The class overview seems interesting. It's weird though. It's cross listed as an English class so there's some jocks in there taking it as their required English course."

Her dad snorted and took a drink of his beer as he took the pizza box from her hands, "Oh, they're in for a rude awakening. Make sure you give them hell."

"Oh, I behaved in that class. I didn't behave in poly sci, though."

Jane bit her lip to contain her guilty smile as her dad's eyebrows rose. "What did you do?"

"I eviscerated a kid who tried to defend Reagan."

"What'd he try to say?"

She stopped for a second, trying to remember, and ultimately chuckled to herself. "Maybe I came on too strong. He just asked 'what

was wrong with Reagan."

"Well, I mean there's so much wrong with the Gipper that the kid probably deserved whatever you threw at him."

"I think I might have terrified him enough to drop the class. I think he swallowed his tongue."

"That's my girl," her dad said, smiling at her with that beaming smile that still, even though she was no longer a child, made her feel like a million bucks. Jane returned his smile, shaped so much the same as his.

"Guys, I told you I was making dinner tonight."

"Shit, we got caught," her dad whispered, pizza red handed in his hands. "It was Jane's idea!"

"Dad! Don't lie!"

"Don't worry, honey," her mom said, a look of amusement on her face as she stood in the threshold of the kitchen entryway, "I know it was your dad's idea. And also, before I'm done scolding you, Andrew, I have to say don't have your department secretary call me to tell me that you will owe me 'personal favors' if I find room in classes for your students."

"Dad!" Jane scoffed.

He shrugged, "What's the good of my wife being the head of admissions for the English department if I can't make the lives of parents everywhere miserable by helping kids change their majors?" He swept mom up in a hug, kissing her on the forehead as she playfully swatted him away. "He's the one this semester, Terry, I promise. I had to help the kid! He had to stick it to his dad."

"You and your bleeding heart."

"Hey, someone did it for me when I got here. I'm just paying it forward. Not everybody has such free-thinking parents as Janie here."

"Oh yes, such free thinking parents that you hid my combat boots

because they're too 'pro-war'," Jane quipped as she spread an overwhelming amount of cheese on the boxed pizza.

"I'm telling you, I did not," her dad said with a poorly masked lie, his finger poking into her side and making her squirm as he walked by. "You lost them."

"They were by the door and then they were gone. You're the only culprit. Mom didn't do it. She'd never tell me how to dress."

"You're never going to let me live this down, are you?"

"I'll let you live it down if the combat boots magically reappear at the door," Jane said sarcastically as she pulled open the oven door and popped the pizza in. "Until then, you're the primary suspect."

"Okay, no more arguments before dinner," her mom said with a lighthearted laugh as she finally pushed her way to the counter and dropped her purse and keys. "Can you at least let me make you each a salad to go with your terrible eating decisions?"

A disgruntled murmur of consent echoed from both Jane and her dad, just like it always did. Jane basked in the normalcy of it all. The jabs and the jokes and the comfort of the tight unit that the three of them had. It was at that moment her confidence in her choice was clear.

She was so glad that she hadn't gone away for school.

---

I'm just so excited to explore the world that is Jane with her true parents who loved her and wanted her and it makes me so teary to even think about it. I can't wait to continue this one! Thanks so much for reading! I'd love to hear from you in that review box below. - L -

## 2. Chapter 2

Hello dear readers! Gosh, I love it when a fic comes out of my brain quickly. It's almost a weekly update! Just a fair minor warning for this fic: I'm basing this heavily in the late-80s, so you'll likely run into a lot of references from that time, including some era-specific slurs that are lobbed at a couple of our characters. Specific Late-80s takes on feminism and homosexuality will play as consistent threads through this fic, as a couple of our awesome characters are choosing to be loud about who they are.

And now, onto chapter 2:

---

Mike Wheeler's heart had always been a glutton for punishment. In second and third grade he'd been desperately in love with Jessica Chambers, with her curly mop of hair and dimpled smile, only to find out after they'd been paired up in art class that she had never, in two years, taken the time to learn his name. In Eighth grade, his mind had been endlessly preoccupied with Lindsay Johnson only to trip and break his thumb at her feet while she laughed out loud, called him a loser and walked away without helping him at all. Junior year of high school brought about his stupid puppy eyed crush on Kristen Bridge, a girl who just so happened to be the girlfriend of the quarterback of the football team. That dream was dead before it even started.

To make it all the more eye-rollingly ridiculous, Mike's infatuations had always been at the expense of girls who actually *had* taken an interest in him. In ninth grade, Marie McLaren had asked him to the Fall dance, the Winter Dance and also the Spring Dance. He turned her down each and every time. Jamie Brandeis had had a bit more luck with him, the two of them spending a summer as coworkers at the mall between Junior and Senior year. She had hung on his every word that summer, she had been a decent kisser, and she had promptly been forgotten when his summer job was over and he was back to school.

Clearly, Mike's focus when it came to girls had always out of whack.

So why should Jane be any different?

It didn't surprise him at all that Mondays and Wednesday had become of a bit of a torturous dream. It didn't even matter that Jane clearly thought of Mike as a stupid idiot. and it definitely didn't seem to matter to him that Jane was so intimidating that he wasn't sure he could even actually *speak* to her if he had to.

Yet, despite all of those obvious truths, Mike couldn't stop thinking about her.

It had been over a month now, ten classes of listening to her speak, his attention growing more rapt attention as each class that went by. Oddly, the main draw was *not* the fact that she was jaw-droppingly pretty, with her wavy brown hair and her adorably chipped nails, a different color each week. It wasn't the sparkling quality of her eyes, bubbling with an intensity that felt far too alive for a 9am class. No, it was deeper than that. It was quite literally what laid *behind* her eyes. It was present in the way she listened to the discussion, her eyes darting around the room from speaker to speaker with eagle-eyed precision, the gears clearly moving in her mind, queuing up her next flawlessly executed argument.

That was it: Jane was easily the smartest person in the room. More than that, Mike was pretty sure that Jane was one of the smartest people he had ever met.

Mike was smart. Really smart. He spent a lot of time with smart people. But he had never encountered anyone who was smart in the same way as Jane. Jane had a visionary intelligence. When she spoke, her grasp of the past and the present was crystal clear, always with a laser focus on the future.

The more she had said over the month, the more Mike had found himself enraptured by her thoughts and arguments. They all happened to point toward two truths:

1. Ted Wheeler's politics were absolute trash.
2. Listening to Jane speak was the closest Mike had yet felt to getting as far away from home as possible.

He couldn't deny that he relished in it.

Mike, however, seemed to be quite alone in that opinion.

The rest of the class seemed exhausted by Jane, or worse. Friction had begun to rise in the last two weeks and, subsequently, Jane's voice had begun to get matched with a competing, yet more sinister tone. In the form of a guy named Brandon.

Brandon was big. Lumbering, even. Mike was sure that he played some kind of sport, not that he really cared to figure out which one. He had been normal enough to begin with, even going so far as to make a joke on the first day, but Mike had seen it in the back of the guy's eyes as Jane had continued to run circles around the rest of the class from day one. It was an annoyance, or something more.

Their disagreements had started small enough. The political ramifications of a refugee crisis, or the state of the former USSR after the Cold War. Yet, in the last two weeks Brandon had escalated consistently. And today? Today Mike felt like they had entered a warzone.

Mike's attention traced up to where it so very often fell. Jane, with her eyes zeroed in on Brandon. Her hair was pulled up into a high ponytail, frizzing and falling against the back of her neck. A slouchy blue sweater was balled up around her hands as her fingers peeked out and tapped a pen against her thigh.

"So," Jane stated with blazing intensity, "You're telling me that you believe that the Equal Rights Amendment shouldn't be ratified, on the grounds that a bunch of guys in the 1700s didn't want women involved?"

"You're here in school, aren't you?" Brandon asked, a smirk on his face that Mike was growing to absolutely loathe, "Obviously we're equal now. I don't see a reason why the whole constitution has to change just to state the obvious."

Leaning forward on the frayed knee of her jeans, Jane's eyes narrowed. "So, the fact that over the course of a standard career a female with equal skills to a man earns, on average, about half a

million less still counts as equality?"

"Listen," Brandon said, holding his hand up in a patronizing manner, "Just because women choose to settle for less doesn't mean that we need to change the constitution for it."

"Women don't 'settle for less,'" Jane said, her teeth tight in a clench, "Political and economic systems are created to favor men. They have been for hundreds of years. The Equal Rights Amendment was written to correct that. If you don't support the ERA, you're a sexist."

"Please, this isn't politics," Brandon said with a laugh, addressing the professor, "This is feminist propaganda."

"FEMINIST PROP-"

"That's enough, Jane," the professor said, holding his hand up, causing Jane's neck to snap in his direction with an icy glare. "Would anyone else care to chime in?"

Mike's tongue felt dry in this mouth. His mind was screaming a million things. Everywhere from his unending hatred for bullies to his ridiculous unearned urge to protect Jane from ridicule. Yet stating '*I support the ERA*' when he hardly knew what the hell it was seemed like a horrendously bad move if he didn't want to get ripped a new one by either of these people. So instead his mouth stayed shut, and a little bit of shame leaked over his chest.

Class ended a few minutes later. Mike pulled on his backpack and headed for the exit when a quick rush of a body blew past him, shuffling him out of the way. Mike watched in surprise as Brandon barreled toward Jane in the doorway a few feet ahead of him. He ran into her, hard, *intentionally*, and knocked her books out of her hand.

"Hey!"

"Oh look, I just gave you something worthwhile to do for once. Clean it up, Feminazi."

Jane gaped at Brandon as he darted away.

Mike didn't even notice he was doing it, but before he could think he

was crouched down beside her feet collecting her books. "That was –"

"Fucking bullshit?" she growled, not looking at him as she reached down to grab some of her things.

"...Yeah. He's – He's an asshole," Mike said as he straightened up and held her books out to her.

"That's one word for it," Jane said, taking her books and finally looking up. She froze for the slimmest fraction of a second, her laser focus upon him in such a way he felt like he might explode, before she averted her eyes, mumbled a quick thank you and took off, stalking down the hall.

---

"So the meathead knocked my books out of my hands this morning and told me to 'clean it up, Feminazi!'" Jane said as she dropped down into the grass next to her roommate and let out a huff, "How was your day?"

"Oh, God. Not *that* bad," her roommate said with surprise. "Want to talk about it?"

"No," Jane sighed. She leaned forward to stretch her shoulders, "I'm just happy to be out of there. I just want to enjoy this warm day. They're almost gone. Tell me about your day. What have you been up to?"

"Honestly?" she said, sitting up and nodding to her left, "I've been lying here daydreaming about making out with that guy. What do you think?"

Jane snorted and looked over toward the nondescript guy studying under a tree about twenty feet away, "I mean, have fun. Not my type."

Her roommate couldn't have been more different from Jane when it came to guys. She seemed to have entered an exploratory phase when it came to men upon arriving on campus. One that Jane did not really join in on. That was about where the differences stopped, though.

Jane had gotten shockingly lucky in her roommate lottery match. This girl was low maintenance. A clear tomboy. They had the same taste in music. She even rode a skateboard around campus. The only complaint Jane had was that she shed bright red hairs all over everything in their dorm room.

In short, Max Mayfield was cool. Really cool.

"I've been trying for weeks to figure out your type," Max moaned, annoyed yet again that Jane was not playing her game, "Just spell it out for me. What kind of guy is your type?"

"Max, I've told you. I'm not interested in dating so I'm trying not to look."

"Jane Rich," she teased at her dramatically, "too busy changing the world to selfishly ogle men."

"That's exactly right!" Jane replied with a laugh.

"Fine," Max conceded, "Not dating. Just... to make out with. What would you look for in a mindless makeout session, no strings attached."

"Okay fine," Jane replied, rolling her eyes. "Funny. Intelligent. Can hold a conversation. Forward thinking. That kind of thing."

Max cackled, "Jane? Um, those are *very* high standards for someone to make out with."

Jane snorted and shook her head. "Hey! If I'm going to put my mouth on somebody's mouth, hell yeah I'm going to have high standards about it."

"Ah, so that's why you won't make out with the hot Republican."

Jane groaned, "I regret ever telling you that."

"It's all I have to go on!" Max cried, "It's all you've given me to work with. Is he still weirdly quiet?"

Jane giggled guiltily, "He's been silent since day one. I think I scared

him. I kind of feel bad."

"No you don't."

"Okay, you're right. I don't."

"I'm just saying one casual makeout session with a hot Republican won't kill you."

Jane shot Max a look.

Sure, her eyes may have grazed his way a few times, but that was it. His rapt attention growing with each class. The way he chewed his lip and scrunched his brow when he listened. The way he stretched, interlacing his fingers into his fluffy hair as he did so.

Jane had principles, but she wasn't *blind*.

She shook her head to dislodge the thought.

"I'm not going to slum it with a Reaganite. But he did pick my books up today when the meathead knocked them out of my hand, so he's at least a polite idiot."

"Oh, how very rom-com," Max teased in a sing-song voice, leaning back and tossing her hair from her cheek as she did so, "Did your hands brush together as he put the books in your arms?"

"Max - "

"Did the room go silent around you as you looked up toward him?"

"Shut - "

"Did you freeze when your eyes connected?"

"Ugh, you're the worst."

"And *you're* blushing."

Jane almost growled as she threw her head back in frustration, "Look, I can't help it that the guy is so much hotter than he deserves to be for how dull he is! I haven't heard him say one thing of substance

since classes started. I - Ugh! This conversation is useless! Again, I'm sorry I ever mentioned this to you."

Max let out an exacerbated sigh, "Okay, fine! At least explain what he looks like so I can find you suitable replacements."

"I'm not - "

" - Will?"

Jane's mouth snapped shut as Max's attention diverted, so very grateful for the distraction.

"Will!" Max called, waving her arms toward a tall thin guy who was walking about thirty feet away.

"Max?!" he cried back, stopping in his tracks before he quickly shifted and made his way over to their direction.

"Who is that?"

"We went to high school together," Max said quickly as she scrambled to her feet and met Will as he reached them. "Dude! I had no idea you went here. How did I miss this?!"

"I don't know! I didn't know either!" Will replied, opening his arms for a hug.

Max hugged him quickly, "Sit with us! I wanna know how you're doing."

"Uh..." Will said, looking down at his watch, "Yeah, sure. I've got a few minutes before I have to meet Mike for dinner. How are you?"

"I'm good!" Max cried, "Happy to be out of Hawkins, that's for sure."

"I know how that feels," Will replied, rolling his eyes.

"Oh, this is my roommate, Jane," Max gestured, looking toward Jane as she added, "Will and I kept each other sane in photography class junior year."

"Nice to meet you," Will said kindly, holding out his hand for her to shake.

"You too."

"Tell me everything," Max exclaimed, her attention back on Will, "How's your major? How's your roommate? What are you getting into?"

"Oh, it's good. Majoring in art, that's good. Living with Mike Wheeler, that's good. And um..." he paused, biting his lip. His eyes slid from Max to Jane for a second before he sighed, seeming to make a decision, "Um, nevermind. What are you majoring in?"

"Psych," Max said, "I honestly didn't know what to pick so I thought I'd start there."

"Can't hurt. Where are you living?"

"Lancaster."

Will's eyes went wide. "How have I not run into you? We're right behind it in Humphrey."

"That's crazy!" Max said. "Okay, we have to hang out. I can't believe you're here. There are so few people from Hawkins that I'd actually *want* to run into. What are you up to this weekend?"

"Oh god, I know," Will replied, pulling a pen and a tattered receipt from his bag. He jotted down his information and handed the slip of paper to Max. "Here's our room information. I'm probably hopping around some Halloween parties Saturday night. You guys want to come?"

Max and Jane looked at each other with a quick nod. "Sure," Max replied, "We're not cool enough to be invited to any parties yet so thank you for making us less lame."

"Speak for yourself," Jane interjected, before she snorted, "Though I've only been invited to faculty parties, so..."

"Do you... teach here?" Will asked, confusion knitting his brow.

"No," Jane corrected, "My parents are faculty. I grew up about two blocks that way," Jane said, pointing to the left.

"Jane knows all the good spots in town that aren't packed with students," Max added with a conspiratorial wink. "She's got the hookups. She's a useful roommate."

"Good to know," Will said with a smile. "Well, you two should definitely come out with us if you want to. It'd be good to catch up for real."

"Cool, I'll give you a call!" Max said.

"Okay, well I should probably run," Will said, pulling his bag back over his shoulder, "Don't want to be late. But it was really good to run into you!"

"Yeah, you too," Max said, "I'll give you a call later this week to get the details. Bye!"

Will waved and quickly disappeared, trotting in the direction he'd been headed before.

"Will's awesome," Max said, "I'm so happy he looks happy. He had so many fucking bullies back at home."

"Oh really?"

"Yeah, there was this really shitty rumor that he and his best friend were gay. We spent a lot of afternoons together because he'd hide out after school in the photography studio Junior year to try and hide from a group of people who were threatening to kick his ass. His friends eventually devised like a really clever way to escape the school everyday with no one seeing them. So, we didn't talk much after that."

"Oh shit."

"Yeah, I mean, I don't know if he is or not. I never asked. But people in Hawkins are shitty. Either way, I always thought he was way too cool for Hawkins. Which, you know, *same*," Max pointed at herself with a joking wink, "So, want to go out for Halloween?"

"Sure," Jane replied easily, "I'll run home and get my costume. I didn't realize Halloween was this weekend."

"Wait, you're going to wear the same costume as you've worn before?" Max asked.

"Of course, it's a whole new audience." Jane said, smiling to herself as she did so. "Plus, it's awesome."

---

Mike sat at his desk in the setting sun as his mom rambled through the phone about Holly's dance classes, Grandma Wheeler's hip replacement, and a few more topics that went right in one ear and right out the other.

"Oh, Darling. Your father has a question for you," she said, interrupting herself and bringing Mike's attention back in an instant.

Mike's stomach tightened. "Yeah, okay. Pass me over."

"Hi Son," he father said with a curt tone. "How's school?"

"It's... fine?" Mike replied, his throat now achingly constricted.

"How are classes?"

"They're... fine."

"Catching on well in business?"

"Um..." Mike cringed, "Yeah."

"Political Science?"

"Yeah, that one is interesting."

"Good," he said, before quickly turning to his point, "I was looking at the class catalogue for next semester. The engineering roster for the spring semester seems weak."

Mike had to physically stop himself from growling into the receiver. "Dad," he said with as much patience as he could muster, "My advisor

is one of the engineering professors. He'll make sure I have the right classes."

The door opened and Will entered, opening his mouth but instantly shutting it as Mike held up his finger up to hold.

"Yes son," his father prattled on, familiar annoyance in his voice, "but IU isn't an engineering school. It's a business school. There are some very strong business classes next semester that you need to take a look at."

"Dad," Mike said through gritted teeth, "I'm not going to drop the engineering classes. They're going really well and the faculty is better than I expected."

"Okay, well. I'm going to drop this class list in the mail and I need you to take a look at it. Give me a call this weekend once you get it. I want to make sure things are lined up correctly."

"Okay..." Mike conceded, shaking his head, "I have to go now. I have to get back to reading. Bye – "

"Son – "

"Yes?"

"Class registration is at the end of next week. I need you to take this seriously."

"*I am* taking this seriously."

"Take a look at the letter I mail and call me over the weekend," his father repeated, "And I hope you're not reading those make-believe books. You've got important things to read now that you're at college. Goodnight, son."

"D - "

The dial tone rang in Mike's ear before he was even able to finish his sentence. Mike sighed as he dropped the phone on the receiver.

"Your dad is a piece of work lately," Will said.

"You could hear that?"

"Yeah. Are you ever going to tell him that you dropped your business major?"

Mike groaned and ran his hand over his face. "Probably not. He'll probably find out at my graduation at this rate. I just... God, I wish I could return to the days when he just *ignored* me."

"Yeah, that would be easier," Will agreed, taking a seat on his bed, "I honestly don't think I heard your dad say more than three sentences in five years before last year."

"Right?!" Mike exclaimed, throwing himself on his bed in an attempt to stretch out the tightness in his chest. "I swear my mom talked to him last year and told him to get more involved, but he's a fucking miserable human being now. I mean, he always was, but before he was a passive miserable human being. Now he's an active one."

"Well, I'll do my best to stop him from pushing you off a cliff when he finds out you're taking classes to write those, what did he call them?"

Mike scoffed, "Make believe books?"

Will snickered, "Ugh. Let me know if I need to send my stepdad as your bodyguard when you tell him."

"Hopefully it won't come to that."

"Oh, hey," Will said, laying down on his own bed, "I just ran into Max Mayfield. Did you know she went here?"

"No, I had no idea. I don't really know her, though. That's cool."

"Yeah, she and her roommate are coming out with us for Halloween."

Mike looked up in surprise. "Did you tell her..."

Will sighed, "No. I wanted to but I chickened out. I don't know it's just... she's from *home*. You know? It's different than coming out to people that didn't know me before."

"I get that," Mike said, "But aren't we stopping by your Alliance party Saturday night?"

"Oh right, I hadn't thought of that," Will said, sucking air between his teeth, "Well, I'll figure it out. Did you find your costume?"

"Yeah..." Mike replied with a cringe. He jumped from the bed and held it up from the box it had been draped over by his desk. "I don't know. Does it still look okay? I feel like the peeling parts are really noticeable. I don't remember it being so ragged."

Mike looked down and worried his lip as he pulled at one of the many fraying bits of the cheap fake leather. The lace-up tunic his mom had made him was riddled with stretch marks from being bundled at the bottom of a box for months.

Will waved his hand at it casually, "It's fine. I don't know why you think that a ranger costume should look nice. You're supposed to be rugged. This looks right."

"Yeah, I guess," Mike replied with a shrug, "But Aragorn isn't just a ranger. He's a ranger *and* the King of Gondor."

Will snorted, "It's fine, Mike. No one is even going to know who you're supposed to be. If you don't like it why don't you just find something else, though? Most people don't use the same Halloween costume each year."

Mike shook his head, "No way, it's a whole new audience. Plus, it's awesome."

That decision begrudgingly made, Mike straightened out the costume pieces hoping that they would recover a bit after hanging up for a few days and motioned to go get dinner.

Upon return, Mike found himself with nothing else to think about but his Dad's far reaching attempts at control. Fingers itching for escape, Mike swiped a paperback off of his desk and tossed himself down on the bed. It felt like a deep relief to break the binding on a new paperback instead of a hard textbook. Intent on drowning Ted Wheeler out of his mind, Mike began the first words.

## *Arrows of the Queen*

*Chosen by the Companion Rolan, a mystical horse-like being with powers beyond imagining, Talia...*

His attempts to forget his Dad worked. In fact, they worked almost too well.

A whole night and into the dawn later, Mike squinted against the soft light streaming in his window, almost gasping as he finished the final page. Feeling exhausted yet better than he had in weeks, Mike let himself pass out, his head full of worlds far beyond Indiana, and far beyond the morning classes that he missed.

He was pretty disoriented when he finally awoke five hours later. Part of him begged himself to skip his afternoon design class as well in order to start the second book in the series. However, that class seemed like a bad one to miss. It actually seemed useful. So instead, Mike haphazardly tossed his books in his bag, pulled on his hoodie, and headed out the door. It was only once he arrived that he realized he was thirty minutes early, his sleep deprived brain completely addled to the point that basic memory was failing him. Not that he minded. It was the perfect opportunity to start Book Two.

Mike slid down against the wall near the door and cracked open the fresh book.

Ten pages in, he heard his name.

"Eager for class, Mike?"

Mike looked up to find Professor Rich standing above him.

"Sorry," Mike said, shaking his head, "I got distracted and I got the class time wrong."

"Good book?"

"Yeah," Mike replied, looking down at the book in his hand, "Great book so far."

"Come on in and tell me about it," Professor Rich said, nodding his

head toward the door, "I'm early too, and I don't have a book to distract me. I finished *The Dark Half* last night. Have you read it?"

"I haven't yet," Mike said as he pulled himself up off of the floor, "Is it good?"

"Not King's best," Professor Rich said with a shrug, "But I enjoyed it. What are you reading?"

Mike fished the first installment of the book from his bag, accidentally having packed it when he'd been so bleary eyed a few minutes earlier. He handed it to Professor Rich.

"It's high fantasy," Mike said as he followed him into the classroom, "I stayed up all night reading the first one. I'm onto the second one now."

"Oh," Professor Rich said knowingly, "So that's why you look hungover. You went on a book bender."

"Yeah," Mike said with a laugh, "I guess you could say that."

Professor Rich examined the novel, skimming the back. "*Arrows of the Queen'*... Oh, it has a female protagonist?"

"Yeah," Mike replied. "She's a pretty strong one, too. I picked it up a few weeks ago when I was trying to do some research for a writing project I'm working on. I'm really liking it after the first book. You can uh, you can borrow it if you want."

"Oh, you sure? That's a real mark of trust," Professor Rich joked as he turned the book over in his hand. "I guess you do know where to find me if I don't return it."

Mike laughed, "Yeah, I mean, I don't need it anymore."

"Thanks," he said, slipping it into his attaché case. He then propped himself up to sit on the main desk and leaned forward onto his knees. "So, tell me. How are classes going?"

"Pretty good for the most part, I guess," Mike said as he took a seat at the desk and dropped his bag, "I'm definitely happy to be taking

English classes instead of business, so thank you for that."

"How'd your dad take it?"

"He uh..." Mike cringed, catching a knowing look from Professor Rich, "He hasn't taken it yet."

"Ah," Professor Rich said, "Well, it might be good to tell him soon. Though remember, he doesn't have much of a say given your scholarship. But as a Dad myself I'm sure I'd probably like to know."

"Yeah," Mike replied, the idea of *this* guy being a Dad seeming weirdly bizarre to him, "I'm trying to figure out how to handle it. I will, though. Soon."

"The rest of your classes going well?"

"Yeah, they are. I –" Mike stopped, "Hey, can I ask you something?"

"I mean I *am* your advisor," Professor Rich said with a sarcastic shrug, "I'm literally paid for you to ask questions to."

"Right," Mike said with a laugh. "Um so... Poly Sci. I'm glad I'm taking it. I'm learning a lot. But I'm kind of worried about my grade."

"Why's that?"

"I don't..." Mike ducked his head, embarrassed by the admission, "I didn't know *anything* about politics and it's a discussion class and I... I don't really know how to discuss it?"

Professor Rich studied him for a moment, seeming to try to decide what to say. "You know, everyone knows about politics; some people just don't realize it. Politics drives your exterior life. Is there anything you're passionate about? I mean, something you or someone you care about is going through that might be affected by how the world is run?"

Mike thought for a moment, a couple of quick ideas coming to his mind, "I guess so, yeah."

"Start there. Sure, there are personal, localized reasons why you care.

But the personal is political. When you find that kind of passionate view on something its usually easier to talk about and find a stance. Once you get the hang of it and you learn a little more about theory and history it becomes easier to do that with topics that don't affect you directly. So start with the personal. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, I think so," Mike replied, the gears turning in his mind. "I'll try that. Thanks."

---

It was settled, Jane felt like shit. No matter how much she curled her knees into her chest as she sat, she couldn't make the stabbing pains go away.

As much a feminist as she was, she could still admit that sometimes... being a woman fucking sucked.

The lights felt too bright above her and she squinted against them, wishing she had sunglasses on this cloudy late October morning. Honestly, she should have just skipped. She was going to ace this class anyway. It wasn't like she didn't have some leeway. It was just that she had been out of the door before she'd thought of staying home. At that point it just seemed silly to walk the same distance back to her dorm as it did to go to class. So here she was, feeling like she was dying on the inside, as Brandon the sexist meathead passed her and took a seat, tossing her a disgusting look.

She did not have the energy to deal with him today... which was a damn shame, because ten minutes into class she could have killed him. Whoever had steered the conversation to the AIDS crisis was her second personal enemy, but Brandon, with his spitting gruff voice and his bigoted eyes, seemed to have eyes only for her as he drawled out his disgusting opinion.

"Go on all you want about AIDS or whatever, but they're gay," he spat. "Why the hell are you acting like they need special treatment. They did this to themselves."

Jane gasped, her blood boiling so much that she shot up in her chair.

However, she wasn't the first to speak.

...Michael was.

Turning slowly in his chair to face Brandon, his face suddenly tight, Michael spoke in voice that was low and shaky. "What you mean they did this to themselves?"

Brandon rolled his eyes, "Being gay is a choice. A pretty stupid choice if you know it's going to get you killed."

Michael stared at him for a minute, something heavy turning behind his eyes. Jane watched his fist clench. "So you're saying that gay people don't deserve to live?"

El's eyes widened in surprise. She leaned back in her chair.

Brandon showed no remorse. He simply shrugged, his heavy neck creasing as he did so. "That's not what I said."

"It is what you said," Mike replied, his back getting straighter and his voice evening out to a tone of indignant anger, "You're blaming them for getting a disease and you're saying that they shouldn't receive help. You're saying they deserve to die."

"I didn't say that," Brandon bit back. "Don't put words in my mouth. I just said that they don't deserve preferential treatment for a mess they made themselves."

Mike's piercing eyes didn't falter. "Then I *didn't* put words in your mouth because you just repeated exactly what I said. You – "

"Okay," the professor interrupted, holding his hand up in the air as he always did, "We've veered off topic. Mia, before you mentioned AIDS you were making a point about..."

The Professor's voice faded out of Jane's ears. Her attention was instead curiously focused on Michael. His sat erect, his eyes wide with surprise, almost as though he hadn't expected the outburst to come from his mouth. His fists were balled in his lap and he focused on the floor. His lips were a thin line as the conversation around them continued.

She completely missed the rest of the discussion.

"Okay, we're going to wrap up a few minutes early so that I can assign your partners for the final," the professor said, calling back Jane's attention. "The final will consist of 30% of your grade, so I recommend you learn to work together, regardless of your differences. The final will consist of exploring a social topic through five different structures of government in order to ascertain the pros, cons, and potential outcomes of each in regard to that topic. Details are on this handout. Grab one as you head out. Your partners will be Mia and Sharon. Ned and Suzie.."

Jane cringed, her heartbeat whipping up into an instant race.

*Please not the meathead. Please not the meathead.*

"Jane and Michael."

Jane released a sigh of relief, but sucked in an instant unexpected breath of nervousness at the same time. She almost coughed as she looked up. Michael was staring at her, the darkness of his eyes echoing the same sensation she felt. Chairs began to scrape around her and bodies began to move, and Michael, all 6 feet 2 inches of him, stood up from his chair and walked over to her.

"Hey," she said, pulling her self up out of her chair and grabbing her backpack, "You had a good argument today."

"Oh!" Michael replied, blinking in surprise, the slightest pink entering his cheeks, "Thank you?"

"Yeah, I – "

"Great, the feminazi got paired with the queer lover. Or is he... the queer? Definitely going to make sure I miss class the day you two present."

Jane's face fell flat as she watched Brandon walk away, wishing with all of her might that she could transfer every cramp she had to him. "That guy is one of the biggest pieces of shit. I'm so glad I didn't get paired with him."

"Y-yeah," Michael replied, tripping over his words. "So, should we um... when do you... do you want to work on this?"

"Um..." Jane replied, looking up to him. "Can we talk after class on Monday? Sorry, I'm not feeling well today."

"Y-yeah, of course," he stuttered, brushing his hair frantically out of his face and averting his eyes, "I was just thinking if you wanted to, you know, be, you know, proactive? But yeah, sure. Sorry to bother you - "

" - You're n -"

" - That's totally fine. Really. Um. Yeah. Feel better, Jane."

Before she could even say another word, Michael frenetically waved and was gone.

Jane let out a dejected sigh as she watched him leave. She was too sensitive today, she knew, but she couldn't help but feel bad. He clearly seemed terrified to speak to her. She thought about it all the way home, opting to turn to the left instead of right, her real bed calling her from home as she gave in and decided to skip her next class.

Maybe (*probably*) she'd been too hard on him. It's not like he was Brandon. Michael seemed respectful, at least. And now, after his outburst in class, he seemed like a lot of something more that she couldn't quite put her finger on.

But that was a thought for another day.

Today, she simply wanted to slip into a deep sleep for the next year. Just some peace and quiet. The kind only home could provide. Yet, when she entered the door, peace and quiet was not at all what she found.

"Oh my God!"

"Jane!?"

Jane whipped around, hiding her eyes against the door in an attempt to try to erase the sudden image of her parents close to tearing each other's clothes off in the kitchen. It's not like she'd seen *too* much, Thank God, but it was *definitely* more than she'd been expecting or

had ever been interested in seeing.

"What are you even doing home?!" she cried, her hands over her face.  
"It's only 11am!"

"Honey, are you okay? Is something wrong?" her mom asked after a moment, her heels clicking fast against the linoleum and then softening out as she hit the shag carpet near the entryway. "Don't you have class?"

"I have cramps and I feel like I want to die and this fucking asshole in my Poly Sci class is harassing me and I just..." Jane sniffed, tears coming up from a million stupid places, "I just wanted to come home and hide in my bed. But I'll – I'll go. I – "

Her mom's arms were around her before she could even reach for the door, guiding her into a hug. It felt stupid how much she instantly relaxed into the comfort of her mother's arms, but she decided not to question it.

"I'm happy to know you two are adjusting well to having an empty nest," Jane said with a hiccupped laugh as she pulled away from her mother's embrace.

The uproarious laugh of her father echoed from the kitchen, and instantly, it was contagious. Tears in her eyes, her every bone hurting, Jane doubled over in laughter, the whole situation so wonderfully and horribly awkward.

"Okay okay," her mom said, pulling herself together after a final chuckle. "But what do you mean a guy in your Poly Sci class is harassing you?"

Jane sighed, "I've been having problems with him for a couple of weeks. Classic bigot. But he ramped it up this week and knocked into me and knocked my books out of my hand and told me to, what was it, "clean it up, feminazi?" And he just, I don't know, it wasn't a threat, I don't think? But he called me it again today and called my final partner a queer and – "

"What's the guys name?" her dad asked as he joined them in their

small dining room.

"Brandon," Jane replied. "Or, meathead, if you ask me."

"Jane, that shouldn't be happening," her mom said in her trademark shrewd and committed tone that always came before action. "Do you want me to talk to that department? I can do something."

"No, no," Jane replied, waving her hand. "If it gets worse I'll let you know but right now it's just... well, it's kind of creepy? But it's mostly just annoying. It makes me feel like I can't talk in class. I mean, not like that *stops* me but – "

"Yeah, I get that," her dad said, taking a seat at the table. "Speaking out for what's right can put you in the crosshairs. You were raised that way, but you've never really experienced this side of it, have you?"

"No, this part sucks," Jane replied, taking the seat next to her dad. "I'm pretty sure every person in my Poly Sci class hates me. And that asshole is making my life a living hell. How did you handle it?"

Her dad shrugged, "For the most part I just did it anyway. But uh, after I almost got kicked out of school I had to watch myself."

Jane's eyes shot up to her dad's. "Wait, what? You almost got kicked out of school?"

Her mom chuckled in the corner for reasons she didn't understand. Her dad smirked toward her before he looked back at Jane.

"Yeah," he started, a hint of rebellion twinkling his expression, "A couple friends and I staged an unannounced Vietnam protest. I got arrested. Your mom bailed me out of jail. I almost got kicked out, but luckily Dave's parents let me use their lawyer."

"Holy shit, Dad!" Jane cried.

"Yeah," he replied shortly, a flash of something dark in his eyes, "I got *really* lucky because a month later my birthday was number one of the draft list."

Jane's mouth dropped open. She looked between her parents in shock. "Why have you never told me this?"

Her dad clicked his tongue as he regarded that question. "Because now's the right time to tell you, I guess. I definitely wasn't going to tell you when you were a kid. But it goes to show that the repercussions of speaking out can be huge. You still do it though. Why?"

"Because it's the right thing to do," Jane replied instantly.

"Exactly," he said, rubbing her arm with a reassuring warmth. "But if that guy's harassing you we can do something about that."

"It's fine." She said, brushing it off.

Her mom interjected again, "Okay, well, if anything else happens I'll make a couple of calls and we'll handle it."

"Thanks," Jane replied, standing up. "I think I'm going to go upstairs and take a nap."

"Oh hey, I have something for you," her dad said quickly, leaning over the table to where he'd tossed down his bag, "I burned through this yesterday so it's a really quick read but I think you'll love it." He held out a paperback book, "It's high fantasy with a female protagonist."

"It has a female protagonist?" Jane asked, her eyes widening in surprise as she snapped it eagerly from his fingers.

"Yeah, it's pretty good. It's the first in the series of, well, I don't know how many. I'll definitely buy the others. But keep this one nice, I borrowed it."

"Okay, thanks Dad," Jane said with a smile. Her dad's book recommendations always turning into her favorites. She leaned down and gave him a quick hug before walking to the entry of the kitchen to do the same for her mom. "Keep it down, whatever you crazy kids get into down here."

Embarrassed laughs faded off as she made her way toward the back

of the house and up the stairs, her bed calling her with an intensity that she could hardly bear. She eased her door open and all but fell onto the mattress, curling up with her second favorite pillow, her favorite being at her dorm, her eyes falling to the book in her hand.

Curious, she cracked the first page.

### *Arrows of the Queen*

*Chosen by the Companion Rolan, a mystical horse-like being with powers beyond imagining, Talia...*

"Oh that reminds me," Jane mumbled to herself with a groan. She pulled herself from her bed and cracked her door, calling downstairs. "Mom?! Can you pull out my Halloween costume? I don't know where you store it."

"Sure!" her mom called back, "Do you want Eowyn or Arwen?"

Jane considered the options of the two wonderfully intricate costumes her mom had made her, each with lace fronts to ensure they'd continue to fit over the years. It was a hard decision, her heart always pulling toward Eowyn but...

"Arwen!"

She could never turn down the opportunity to wear elf ears, after all.

Jane crawled back into bed, her eyes already back on the first page of the book, ready for something, anything, to take her mind far away from the day.

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I hope you enjoyed chapter 2! I'm already hard at work on Chapter 3 because I'm definitely excited to jump into an LoTR Halloween ;) And for the record, Arrows of the Queen? I know nothing about it. I can't recommend it but for the fact that it was a book series that came out in the late 80s. It has 4 and a half stars though so it seems quality! As always, let me know your thoughts below. I always love to hear from you! - L -

### 3. Chapter 3

Halloween, 1989 - Part One

10:00 PM

*"They were all of them, more than friends; they were kin - the important kind, soul-kindred. Her family. Her **real** family. This was where she'd belonged all along; as she'd told Skit, it had just taken her this long to see it. And with a lighter heart, she turned back down the path that led to the Collegium. The Collegium - and home."*

Jane sighed contentedly and closed Arrows of the Queen, letting her eyes slip shut as the final words floated over her. The soft yellow glow of the lamp behind her skirted like a haze beneath her eyelids, almost serving to detach her from where she was.

And that she *could*.

What she wouldn't give for an adventure like that, she thought traitorously, almost flinching at her mind's whisper of the thought. For a chance at a real fight against the big problems, for the opportunity to be imbued with the power to truly change things. New friends and new worlds and new adventures. Ones far beyond the living room where she sat, tucked cozily away in Indiana, far away from anything worth fighting for at all.

Jane blew her hair roughly as a strand fell into her face. She could feel the now familiar tension creeping up again, almost in an instant. It seemed to be becoming a constant companion over the last few days. It was that very tension that had her cooped her up alone in her parents' house on a Saturday night. It had caused her to avoid campus at all costs, sneaking on for class and then retreating quickly back to her childhood bedroom. It made the streets feel too bland and the air smell too familiar. It whispered things she didn't want to hear, shadowed with questions, itching with potential regrets.

Jane hated herself for the fact that she couldn't shake off that fucking asshole in Poly Sci, with his pudgy angry face, his domineering size, and his sneer. With his disgusting voice and even more disgusting

words. The way he looked at her when he spoke... It made her shake just to think about it. She couldn't help but admit that as the days had passed his space in her mind had only grown, leaving shadows in places that were usually clean. She'd found herself watching her back on campus, the presence of his vitriol seeming to follow her despite his absence, as though he might just simply jump out of the bushes.

Which, she had an unsettling suspicion that he might...

More than anything, though, she hated the fact that he had turned the cornerstone class of her semester into something that she dreaded. It was a necessity to return to that room, but it made her nervous just to think about it. She needed a thicker skin, she knew, but it wasn't growing fast enough.

She couldn't deny though that his effect was causing her to ask some hard questions. Ones that she didn't want to ask. One that felt a little too late.

Jane squirmed as the whispers simmered again.

It had been a calculated decision to stay in Indiana for undergrad, she reminded herself with a flat internal tone. There were so many pros: Money was tight and her parents' positions at Indiana University made it free. An undergrad here opened up avenues for bigger decisions down the road. Unpaid internships were now an option with her untouched yet modest college fund. Grad school loans were now an option upon the shoulders of a clean slate.

And, though she would never admit it out loud, a little bit of her had truly been afraid that she would miss her parents a little too much, and a little too fast...

None of those perks, however, changed one harsh, cold, immovable fact:

Indiana was full of close minded bastards.

## **KNOCK KNOCK**

A fist against the hard wood of the front door broke Jane from her spiral just in time. Curiously, she placed down her book and shuffled

through the house in socked feet, peeking carefully through the glass before - *she gasped*, her eyes bulging as her heart spiked into her throat.

A person stood on the other side of the glass. Donning a ski mask, burly coat, and... a machete.

"Oh shit! I'm sorry! It's just me! I tried to call but no one answered!" Moving swiftly, the person removed the mask as their hurried female voice apologized profusely.

Jane crumpled into herself, relief quaking through her with a laugh as she unlocked the door. "Max, what the hell!?" Jane exclaimed with lost breath. She stepped out of the way for the girl to come into the house. "You just scared the shit out of me!"

Max smiled apologetically for the quickest of seconds before her own eyes popped open in surprise. "You're not ready?!" she exclaimed, looking Jane up and down, fully taking in her sweatpants, messy hair, oversized Live Aid t-shirt and her dad's old cardigan. "We're going to be late!"

"Umm...Late for what?" Jane asked with a hesitant tone.

Max huffed, "For Halloween, dummy! What? You think I walk around in a ski mask every weekend? You said you were coming with me, remember? With Will?"

Jane's jaw dropped. "Shit! I completely forgot! I'm so sorry!"

"Clearly," Max said with wry amusement. "Honestly, I didn't know if I'd even find you here. I had to look up your address in the phone book. But you're here and I found you so now you're trapped. Go get dressed!"

"Um..." Jane froze.

...A party. She almost cringed at the thought of the loud terrible music, the poorly planned or slutty costumes, the frat boys doing keg stands and getting into fights...

"Jane," Max said flatly, clearly reading her expression. "You are *not*

canceling on me. I'm not going to this alone."

Jane raked Max's face and saw no room for debate. She squirmed as she acquiesced, "O-kay. I'll get my costume." Begrudgingly, Jane turned around and started back through the house.

Max's heavy boots made a strong gait as she followed. "Are you feeling okay? You seem off."

"Yeah. I just... I'm fine," Jane shrugged weakly. She took a right into her Mom's study and turned on the light. The garment bag was laid out over her mom's chair, clearly ready for her. Jane only remembered at that very moment that she'd asked her to unpack it many days earlier. "I'm going to need help putting this on," Jane said as she held up the bag. "It's a bit of a process."

"What's the costume?"

"Arwen."

"What's Orwen?"

"Arwen," Jane corrected. "She's a character from the Lord of the Rings."

"Oh, isn't that like a book about magic or something?"

Jane snorted, "Yeah, something like that."

"Aww, adorable. A nerd costume!" Max cooed in her trademark tease. "I don't know shit about that kind of stuff but you'll fit right in with the boys tonight. Massive nerds. Okay, what do I have to do?"

Jane unzipped the garment bag and pulled out the skirt of the deep maroon velvet dress. "Okay, so you just -"

"- *This* is what you're wearing?" Max replied, gasping slightly. She reached out and skirted her hand across the supple velvet and satin trim.

"Yes?" Jane replied tentatively. "Is that... bad?"

"No! It's just... Jane, you're going to be the belle of the ball! This is fancy!"

"Well, I'm sorry I don't have a Freddy Kruger or a plastic nurse costume," Jane replied flatly. "This is all I have."

"Okay, okay, you dork," Max said as she rolled her eyes. "Let's get you dressed."

Jane wrestled off her shirts as Max did the work to get the dress off of the hanger. She did a good job of assisting as she slipped Jane into the dress, seeming to understand the intricate lacing on the arms in order to successfully get her cinched in.

It only took a moment before Jane felt ever so slightly transformed. She spun upon the final lacing, the long belled sleeves dusting heavy against her hands in a way that made her smile involuntarily.

"Wow." Max said, standing back and taking it in. "You look *gorgeous*. I mean, not as gorgeous as *me*, of course." She dramatically modeled her oversized coat and pants, "But close."

Jane giggled, the sensation feeling surprisingly nice. Max was already on to the next step, though. She scooped Jane's clothes from the ground and tossed them into Jane's arms before moving to the door. "Okay, go do anything else you need to do to get ready. Where's your liquor cabinet?"

"My liquor cabinet?" Jane replied in surprise.

"Yeah. We can't go out to Halloween sober," Max replied with a wink over her shoulder. "It's not allowed. I think there's a law against it."

Jane rolled her eyes but walked Max over to the liquor cabinet in the living room, nonetheless.

"Just... can you make me something sweet? I hate the taste of alcohol."

"If it'll get you to drink I'll make it with Kool-Aid," Max joked as she knelt down to survey the options. "And you're drinking it fast because we have to go. It's after 10 o'clock. We're supposed to be there right

now."

"Okay," Jane said, starting up the stairs toward her room. "Make that and meet me in my bedroom. First door on the left. I just need to put on my ears."

"Your EARS?!"

"Yeah," Jane replied matter of factly, "I'm an elf. Was that not clear?"

"Oh my God! I am so second guessing being friends with you."

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**10:15 PM**

"Maybe we shouldn't go..." Will said nervously. He glanced around the empty porch, taking in the dim lights inside of the windows. "Maybe there's no party. I probably have the night wrong or - "

"You don't have the night wrong, we're just early." Mike kept his voice steady, just as he had for the entire walk over, and just as he had for the entire night if he was honest. Yet still, nothing Mike said or did seemed effective in giving Will any semblance of calm.

"But it's 10:15," Will countered, looking at his watch, his voice high and tight. "I- I thought we were going to be *late*... But this place is... empty?"

"Maybe this is one of those 'fashionably late' things?" Mike offered.

Will let out a nervous laugh and dropped his head. "We are so terrible at this..." He took another drink straight from the whiskey bottle he'd been nursing for the entire walk over, a graduation gift from Jonathan that had finally found its use. Will's face puckered. "Why do people enjoy this?!" he sputtered, looking down at the bottle as though it had harmed him. "Ugh, desperate times..." he groaned, quickly taking another sip, the growing pattern of Will's evening starting itself all over again.

Will took a seat near the edge of the wide front step of the empty porch, shyly peeking behind him toward the front door. Music started in the house. A good sign. Yet still, neither of them moved. "Can we

just wait for Max out here?" he asked, his shoulders slumping the slightest bit.

"Oh, of course," Mike replied emphatically, joining him for a seat on the step. "There's no way I'm going in that house when it's empty. Complete nightmare scenario."

"Maybe we don't have to go in at all? Ever?" Will asked with an agonized plead. The bull whip upon the belt of his khaki pants once again began to make worried paths through his fingers.

"We don't have to go. We can go home right now," Mike offered. "But it does mean you'll have to ditch Max."

"Why did I *invite her*!?" Will groaned. He threw his head back dramatically, "I can't believe I *gave her the address* for the Alliance party and then chickened out on telling her. What the hell was I thinking!?" Will paused, groaning as he looked over to Mike, "This is so much harder than anyone else I've told here. God, I'm so nervous it feels like I'm telling you or my Mom again." His knee jangled as he looked up and down the street.

"Maybe you don't have to tell her tonight? If you're this nervous?"

The laugh that cut from Will's mouth was filled with angry self loathing, "Oh hi, Max! Welcome to this Gay and Lesbian Alliance party. Nope, I'm not gay, straight as an arrow. Why do you ask?"

"Okay, okay," Mike cut in, putting his arm reassuringly around Will's shoulders, patting him to quell his spiral. "Max was always nice to you, right? Didn't you tell me once that you were thinking of telling her Junior year when all that shit was happening?"

Will's face twisted into an agonized cringe, "Maybe for about one second. Then I came to my senses." He took another sip from the whiskey bottle, his face both contorting and relaxing at the same time, in the weirdest way, "I haven't talked to her in forever. I don't think I said more than ten words to her last year. We didn't have any classes together. She could be totally different now. What if she's an asshole and calls everyone tomorrow and rats me out to the entire graduating class of Hawkins High?"

"I really don't think Max is like that," Mike offered with a patient tone. "And if she is, well, screw her! We'll just ditch her. She wouldn't be worth your time anyway."

"Yeah..." Will mumbled. He stared quietly into his bottle for a moment, now almost half empty, before he looked up to Mike, a sad lazy smile gracing his lips. "You're a good friend."

"And you're getting drunk," Mike replied with amusement.

"Maybe..." Will said with a half hearted shrug.

A mess of ten students made their way up the steps, side stepping Mike and Will as though they weren't even there. Mike watched them pass into the house, each of their costumes more extravagant than the last. When he looked back, Will was staring at him, his eyes narrowed and his head tilted at such an angle that it threatened to make his fedora slip off of his head.

"What?" Mike said hesitantly, pulling back his arm.

"It's just... why are you so calm tonight? It's- I don't mean this in a bad way, but it's not like you."

Mike snickered and much to his dismay, his own anxiety peeked up its head, seemingly roused by the observation of its absence. Mike tried to play it off. "It's what a good ranger would do," he said with a shrug, pulling the edges of his dark cloak around him in the process, "Plus, you've put up with my anxiety for the last three days. The least I can do is put up with yours for the night. It's like taking a break from my own brain."

Will smirked, "Yeah, I guess that's fair. How goes '*Political Current Events: Volumes 1980-1988?*' by the way?"

Mike shuddered. The stack of matching books that desperately covered his desk back at their dorm came into stark view in his mind's eye. "Honestly? It gives me a tension headache just hearing that title."

Will chuckled. "So it take it you're *not* suddenly a political expert?"

"Not enough to keep up with *her*," Mike replied flatly. *There it was.* The anxiety roared up in a gleeful return, turning his stomach into a fresh vat of acid. Mike groaned. "I'm going to make the biggest ass of myself."

"Come on," Will offered. "She can't be *that* intimidating,"

"You think I'm exaggerating?" Mike asked, almost shuddering. "She's the most intimidating girl I've ever met! She could teach the fucking class. And I'm going to have to spend hours with her, *alone*. And she's just..." Mike dropped his head, the constant presence she had taken over in his mind for the last two months returning to its stunning center stage, "She's so smart and so intense and it absolutely does *not* help that she's way too pretty for me to even make a coherent sentence around. You should've seen me last week. I was just like -" Mike made a series of comical sputtering noises, contorting his face in a self deprecating manner as he did so. "It's going to be brutal. Thanks for bringing it up."

"Sorry," Will said with a laugh. He knocked the bottle into Mike's knee. "You should drink this. I got you riled up. It's starting to relax me."

Mike actually took the bottle this time, finally giving in after multiple attempts on Will's part to get Mike to partake. He surveyed the bottle for a quick moment before the fresh burning in his chest made him follow his friend down an ill-fated path. The stinging liquid hit his tongue with an almighty burn, making it almost impossible to swallow.

"So what's your goal with learning all of this stuff?" Will asked, "To impress her?"

Mike snorted derisively, "No. I could never impress her -"

"- That's bullshit," Will cut in in an instant, knocking his shoulder into Mike's, causing them both to wobble on the step. "You act like you've never been able to keep it together in front of a girl, which is a total lie."

"Not one like her."

"Stop selling yourself short," Will said forcefully, "You're smart. Really smart. You're here on a full ride, for God's sake. You're a handsome, nice, intelligent guy. You could impress any girl."

"Thank you?" Mike said, taken aback. "You're definitely drunk now, aren't you?"

Will rolled his eyes. "Maybe. But that's not the point! The point is you're being an asshole to yourself and I'm going to call you out on it!"

"Fair," Mike said with a chuckle. He took another drink, the pull from the bottle becoming a bit easier than the last, "Well, at least I don't have to deal with that tonight. So I'll forget about Jane and you'll face Max and then we'll never go to another party again. Sound good?"

Will took the bottle back and forced another sip. "That last part sounds amazing. I think I'm feeling a little bit better, though."

And so it went.

Over the course of the next forty five minutes Mike and Will made their home on the front step, scooting closer to the edge as more and more party goers arrived and bypassed them on their way into the house. Will's nervous glances toward the side walk in search of Max lessened and, in exchange, their always present casual chat about their comic book project picked back up. The bottle of whiskey slipped between them all the while.

And oddly, with every sip, Mike found himself feeling better, little bit by little bit. The last few days had felt heavy and draining. Yet now, as he passed the bottle of whiskey back and forth with Will, small releases occurred. First in his shoulders, and then at the back of his eyes. The chill in the night air lessened as his cheeks warmed, making his smile ratchet up bit by bit.

Mike had had a beer or two in the past. But this? Drinking straight from a bottle on the front porch of a random house like an idiot? This felt *new*. And to be honest, the novelty was starting to feel kind of *nice*.

"Do you think Max ditched us?" Will asked, chuckling thickly to himself after a while, the sounds of the party loud in their ears where there had once been silence. He turned toward the door. "Did she walk past us? What time is it?"

Mike fumbled against the fake leather of his gloves, his fingers struggling to do their normal duty in a way that made him giggle. He squinted at his watch, pulling it close to his face. "11. Do you want to check inside? Are you ready to face her?"

"Mmm..." Will mused dramatically, "Not yet. Let's wait a little longer. I like our stoop." Will grinned, looking into the bottle. "Have you been looking at the costumes? What was your favorite?"

"Kind of. I wasn't paying too much attention. You?"

"Did you see Beetlejuice?" Will asked, his eyes lighting up in a weird way. "I liked him."

"Yeah!" Mike exclaimed. "That was a really good costume."

"Yeah, I liked him." Will said with a smile, his eyes skirting across the porch behind them where bodies had started to fill in.

Mike's eyebrows raised at Will's far off glance and reddened cheeks. "Will...?" Mike started, the upcoming words feeling hilariously weird on his lips but slipping out with bizarre ease none the less. "Are you talking about the costume... or the guy?"

Will shrugged, his expression uncharacteristically playful. "I'm just gonna keep drinking this and forget you asked me that."

Mike laughed in reply, and once he started he couldn't much find it in himself to stop. His laugh felt louder and thicker than he'd had in months, like ice cracking with glee inside of his chest. Mike took the bottle again, laughing all the while in an extremely foreign daze, and brought it to his lips.

Yet, this time, nothing came out.

"Well, that's a bad sign!" Mike said, his eyes wide as the empty glass caught the lights above them in a fractured splay.

"No! This is a good sign!" Will replied emphatically. He snatched the empty bottle and held it over his head in a dramatic fashion. "This is *perfect*. I never could've guessed it but this is all so *perfect*! I wasn't ready, Mike. I was *so* not ready. Even an hour ago. But now? Now I am! I'm *so* ready. Here, let me practice."

"What?"

Will latched onto Mike's arm and looked him straight in the eye, his vision both intense and blurry at the same time, his cheeks piqued with blush. "Mike. I'm gay." He waited for Mike's response, shooting him a frustrated look when he didn't receive one. "Well? How *was* that?!"

"Good... job?" Mike offered with an odd laugh.

"See?! Yes!" Will exclaimed, tossing his hand in the air, "It's easy now. This stuff is magic! Why haven't we done this before?"

"Nice costume, Indiana Jones!" a boy called from the steps.

"THANK YOU!" Will cried back at full volume, his eyes wide, hiccuping as he did so. He slapped his hand over his mouth and looked back at Mike. "Oh my God! It actually makes you hiccup! I thought that was just in cartoons!"

Mike buckled in laughter. "I want cartoon hiccups!"

"Maybe you just need more!" Will said loudly, clapping his hand on Mike's shoulder. "Let's go inside and get more!"

"More?" Mike asked. "Is that a good idea?"

"We got in this deep. Why not?!" Will said with a shrug, an odd dare in his eyes. "Oh! R.E.M. is playing! Come on!"

"Will *wait!*" Mike said, latching hard onto Will's arm. "Are we... Are we actually *enjoying this?!*"

"Oh my god! I think we are!" Will replied with a surge of glee. He bounded up in a way that almost seemed unsafe. "Come on! Let's go party."

"Oh God, that sounds so weird coming from you." Mike chuckled as he unsteadily pulled himself up from the porch step.

Mike followed Will, finally, after so long, through the front doors of the Alliance house. It was an old rickety Victorian that was sturdy enough to handle the accumulating droves of college students across its wooden floors. The fact that they'd believed they'd arrived to an empty house seemed so silly the second they entered. It was decorated to the nines. Cotton cob webs filled every doorway and sprawled the walls, making the whole house a bit of a maze that people have to crawl through in order to move from room to room. Each room was lit with different colored light. *Stand by* R.E.M. pumped through the hallway as they maneuvered the crowded hall, now teeming with shockingly good costumes, voices, and laughter.

Mike felt an odd yet delirious calm wash over him as they moved through the house in search of more drinks. Smiling ear to ear, the sensation a foreign yet welcome release.

Will stopped, yelling a loud Hi! to someone in the hallway.

"I'll go find drinks and meet you back here!" Mike called into his ear before darting back off in the search. With a confident stride to his step, Mike smiled. It was an odd feeling, but oh so very welcome. Nothing, nothing at all, felt like it could break his calm tonight.

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## 11:00 PM

Jane worked as quickly as she could, sipping her drink whenever Max commanded it, at one point chugging half a glass so that Max could pour her a second one. She spirit gummed her pointed ears to the ends of her real ears, then tried to tame her hair, quickly giving up and compensating for the unmanageable waves with a quick sweep of braids around the crown of her head and a bit of mousse to minimize the frizziness. Finally, she topped it off with the best elven makeup she could do on short notice.

"How do I look?" Jane asked, tilting around to catch Max's attention as she silently rifled through Jane's high school yearbook.

"God, it's so unfair how much cuter the boys were at your high school..." Max mumbled as she looked up. "You look great! Gorgeous. Too pretty, really. One more drink then we really gotta go." Max grabbed the whiskey.

"This is officially going to be the most I've ever had to drink. I already feel woozy, are you sure?" Jane asked, moving to sit on her bed as Max held out the bottle and a can of ginger ale to mix Jane her next drink.

"Just one more. It's just now that I know your parents have good whiskey I can't imagine having to drink college party swill all night." Max topped off the glass, set down the materials, and clinked her own glass to Jane's. "So, what the hell have you been up to this week? I don't think I've seen you since Tuesday or something."

"I've stopped by the room a couple times to trade out books, but yeah, I don't know. I've just been in a funk," Jane said with a shrug, "I wanted to sleep in my own bed, I guess."

"It's not like I'm complaining," Max said, "It's like a have a single and I hate people so that's awesome. But I like *you*, so... Have you been feeling sick?"

"No, I don't know..."

"What is it then?"

Jane sighed, the fluid sensation in her body making the words ease out with a bit more honesty. "I just... Ugh... I guess I just thought college would be different, you know?"

"How so?" Max asked. She sat down on the bed beside Jane.

Jane's shoulders slumped, "It's just... I don't know why I thought that crappy Indiana high school students would magically morph into a bunch of free thinking people trying to change the world the second they got to college but... I guess I did? It's so stupid. I counted the days to get out of high school, and then I moved less than a mile away from where I lived before. Why did I think this would be any different?"

"Did something happen?" Max asked, concern stitching her brow.

Jane fell back against her bed, the soft lights of her room played so nicely along the ceiling, She let her eyes lose their focus a bit as she continued. "The meathead called a feminazi again."

"God, he's still going?" Max groaned. "He's sounds terrible."

Jane cringed, "I'm starting to think he's the worst person on this campus. I *hate* him. I hate how he gets under my skin like this. This time I wasn't alone though. Oh! You'll be happy to know the hot Republican spoke. That was weird."

"I'm so glad that you're finally accepting this nickname," Max teased, "What did he say?"

"That's the weird part. He called out the meathead for being homophobic."

"Well, *that's* a surprise."

"I know! So then naturally the meathead called him a queer," Jane shuddered. "I don't know, I just... it's stuff like this that's just making me wonder if maybe I made a mistake? Maybe I should've gone somewhere else. Far away. Like San Francisco or Boston or something. Some place where stuff is happening and people's minds are opening up. I don't know."

"So you're telling me you're regretting going to school in your hometown."

"Or Indiana period."

"Well, I *totally* get that," Max said dryly, "I've regretted being in Indiana every day for the last five years. But for now, just like me, you're stuck here. So, what are you going to do about it?"

"What do you mean?" Jane asked curiously.

"Well, are you going to keep hiding at your parents' house, pretending its not happening? Or are you going to try to make the best of it?"

"I'm not hiding," Jane replied with a scoff.

Max raised her eyebrow. "...really...?"

"I'm *not* hiding."

"Jane," Max said, her face falling flat. Jane felt her chest tense at the look. "You're on campus maybe two days a week. How many people have you met? Have you even tried to make friends?"

"We're friends!"

"Other than your roommate who you're forced to spend time with! Look at you! You seemed completely content to stay in your PJs on a Saturday night at your parents' house your freshman year of college. Hell, I mean your parents aren't even home on Halloween. It seems like even *they* have a better social life than you."

"That's harsh." Jane deadpanned.

"I don't mean to be harsh, but it..." Max looked at Jane warily before she continued. "It doesn't seem like you're trying."

"I - " Jane started, biting her tongue. "I've met people in the environmental club. And... debate?"

"Have you actually *hung out* with any of them?"

"At volunteer events!" Max looked unconvinced. "I know some upperclassmen - "

" - who you don't hang out with because no one actively hangs out with freshmen when they're Juniors and Seniors?"

Jane sighed dejectedly, "Yeah okay... you made your point. Are you happy?"

"I just want you to give people a chance!" Max said honestly, "I admire you, Jane. You're crazy smart and insanely passionate about stuff that I don't even know how to start understanding. But you've got to remember that not everyone was raised like you. For most people here this *is* the start of a really new experience. Who knows,

maybe their brains are all expanding right now and by next semester you'll be surrounded by newly-minted free thinkers rebelling from their parents, just like you want."

"I'd love for you to be right," Jane replied with a sad laugh.

"*I am* right," Max said simply. "Believe me, I know making friends in Indiana is hard, but it's possible. You just have to give people the benefit of the doubt. Don't judge them right away."

Jane gasped, locking eyes with Max. "Are you calling me judgy?"

Max dropped her a heavy look. "I don't know. Would I call the girl who jumped down a guy's throat so hard on the first day of school that he's now afraid to talk to her, even though all he did was ask a single question 'judgy'?

"Okay... fine...maybe I'm a *little* judgy," Jane admitted, "But it doesn't matter. I have to be nice to *him* now. I got paired with him for the final project."

"What?!" Max yelped, bouncing on the mattress and nudging Jane in the process, causing her drink to splash a couple of drops onto her comforter, "How did you not tell me this?!"

Jane rolled her eyes. "Because I knew you'd act all weird about it! Which you are clearly doing, by the way. Anyway, It's not like I'm all that excited about it. I'm probably going to have to do all of the work for the project because I need to get an A." She took another drink.

Max scoffed, "Oh come on, not even one *teeny tiny* piece of you is excited that that you'll get to stare at him for hours across a library table?"

"Michael's cute, sure, but it's not like that. *I'm* not like that. I'm attracted to smart guys. But I'm..." Jane growled and shook her head, "How do you always get me to talk about this?! It's all a distraction and I need to ace this class so, no. I just need him to pull his weight."

"Hey!" Max exclaimed sarcastically. "Do you remember when I literally *just* called you judgy and then you proved me right?!"

"Shut up!" Jane scoffed.

"Give him the benefit of the doubt! He got in the meathead's face so *maybe* he's not the terrible evil Reagan lover you've painted him out to be."

Maybe the booze was going to Jane's head, because for a split second before she was able to catch herself... Max seemed like she had a point. Plus, Jane couldn't deny that sitting across from Michael at a library table all night wouldn't be a bad view, with his shaggy black hair falling into his dark eyes... his hand absentmindedly batting it away... He probably had a nice smile, not that she would ever see it since he was terrified of her, but he probably did...

Okay, the booze had *definitely* gone to her head.

"What time are we supposed to meet your friend?" Jane asked quickly, pushing herself up from the bed to stand.

Max looked at her watched and groaned, "Oh shit, an hour ago. It's 11. You took forever! We need to go."

"Sure," Jane said. She knocked back her drink, recoiling at the burn as she drained the final unmixed bit at the bottom. "I'm ready."

They were out of the house within five minutes, cleaning up their mess in an effort to hide their treachery and theft from Jane's parents, and before she knew it, Jane was out in the street amongst a growing throng of costumed college students, her cheeks feeling oddly warm against the chilly night air, her lips turned up in an unexpected smile.

"Thanks for getting me out of the house, Max." Jane said sheepishly. "I'm feeling a little better."

"Oh, you're very welcome. Here. One for the road." Max pulled a peach wine cooler out of her jacket pocket and shoved it in Jane's hand.

Jane gasped. "Did you take these from our fridge?!"

"Was I not supposed to?" Max said with a look of pure fake

innocence.

"I – well its done now!" Jane relinquished with a laugh.

"Thatta girl!" Max cried, "Look at you rebelling! We're loosening you up after all!"

"Maybe a little bit..." Jane said. She cracked the cap on the wine cooler with a little more excitement than she could have expected and took a sip. "Oh! This is way better than that whiskey drink!"

"Okay, I'm going to ignore the fact that you just insulted my bartending abilities," Max scoffed, slipping her arm over Jane's shoulder and turning down the final road toward the address. "Now, Jane. What's your goal tonight?"

"What do you mean?"

"We just talked about this. What is your *goal* tonight?" Max repeated firmly.

"Um...Make friends?" Jane guessed.

"Yes! And how are you going to do that?"

"Be nice..."

"And?"

Jane groaned, "And not be judgy."

"Exactly!" Max exclaimed, patting her on the back, "Okay, this is the address. We're here."

Jane stopped fast. Her eyes popped open wide at the house in their wake. She shot Max a curious look.

"This is the Alliance house."

"The what now?"

"The Gay and Lesbian Alliance house."

"How do you know that?" Max asked, tilting her own head curiously at the house. It was nondescript, the front porch mingling with a few random bodies, muffled music echoing out onto the street. "Just looks like a normal house to me."

"If you were a GLAAD house in the middle of Indiana would you advertise it?" Jane offered dryly.

"Yeah. Good point."

"I've come to ally actions here a few times with my parents, that's how I know." Jane looked over Max's shoulder, "You're sure this is the address Will gave you?"

Max looked back at the tiny slip of paper and surveyed the house. "Yep, this is it. Is this... is this okay with you?"

Jane laughed, her mood improving even more at the turn of events, "Honestly, I'm happy about it. I was worried we were going to end up at a frat house. This is great. You?"

"Oh, I mean, yeah. Um... new experiences, right?" Max said with a shrug. "Makes me curious about a couple things though... You ready?"

"Yeah."

Jane walked forward in an instant. Her feet carried her up the steps and through the door with a bit of an intoxicated skip, her trusty red Converse hidden comfortably beneath her free flowing empire waist dress. The party had the feeling like it was just beginning to pulse. They wove through the long crowded hallway that bisected the house, their eyes peeled for any sign of Will within the mass of costumes. Each room they peeked into was obscured with heavy cotton webbing, making the search for Will take on a sense of a game.

Max darted into a room on the left without warning and tugged Jane behind her. Jane smiled, almost giggling, as they shimmied through the cob webs and arrived in a sparsely populated blue lit room. Will stood right inside the door, dressed all in khaki, complete with a rumpled hat and a bull whip on his belt. He was speaking animatedly

to a small group of girls.

"Indiana Jones!" Max cried as she tapped him on the shoulder.

Will spun around, his face alight with a drunken, seemingly *very* drunken, smile, when instantly, his entire face crashed.

Taken aback, Jane shuffled to a stop in front of him.

"Uh..." he stuttered, his eyes slipping back and forth from Max to Jane with a languid overwhelm. He stepped away from the group he'd been speaking to, letting their circle close without him as he stared at Max nervously. "Uh... Good Jason Voorhees." He offered with a lame shakiness.

"Thanks..." Max said suspiciously. "What's wrong?"

"Okay!" Will exclaimed, throwing his hands in the air in an apologetic manner. His eyes closed tight and his voice ratcheted up an octave. "I should've told you on the phone or when I saw you but I *chickened out*, so *I'm so sorry*, but..." he took a deep breath, his stance wavering. "But I - I..."

"Will?" Max said calmly, reaching out to touch his arm. His eyes snapped open as she did so, thick fear lacing through them. "Is this about that fact that you invited us to the GLAAD house? Because if so I'm pretty sure I know what you're trying to say."

"Yeah..." he replied unsteadily, his eyes swimming with drunkenness. "Oh *God!* You don't have to stay! I totally understand if you're not comfortable being here or want to leave! I - "

"No way! It's *totally* cool," Max replied, shaking his arm.

Will stopped, shell shocked for a second. "You're... you want to *stay*?"

"Hell yeah!" Max replied easily. "This party seems way cooler than a frat rager or something. Right, Jane?"

"Oh yes!" Jane offered Will a kind smile, working hard to hide how bad she felt for his fear. "We're happy to be here! Really!"

"Really?!" Will replied dramatically. He almost buckled with relief as he looked back to Max. "Did you... did you *know* already?"

"I mean, I can't say I never *suspected* but I didn't just want to come out and ask, you know?" Max said reassuringly, "but just know - If anyone *ever* fucks with you I will absolutely kick their ass. You got that?"

Will laughed nervously, his tension cracking a bit. "Okay, cool. *Thank you.* Thanks for being cool about this. Thank you *so much.* I'm so sorry I didn't tell you. It's just...you're from home and all and - "

"- And Hawkins, Indiana is full of unaccepting trash?" she offered.

"Yes!" Will exclaimed. "Exactly!"

"It's okay, but thanks for telling me now." Max replied, before her eyes went instantly wide. "Wait!" She paused for a moment before she leaned in to Will with a hesitant bite to her lip. "Okay I *have* to ask one thing. Are you and... Mike...a *thing*? Is *that* part true?!"

"What?! Oh *God* no!" Will said, laughing aloud, waving his hands in the air to make his point. "Mike's straight. He's *really* straight. We're just friends."

"Oh fuck!"

It was hard to see in the dark, but judging from the cringing expression on Max's face Jane was pretty sure that her cheeks had instantly turned red. "I'm sorry! That was so rude of me to ask! It's just, *you know*, and you said you were living with him and those old rumors and - "

"It happens all the time, really. It's fine!"

"No its -"

Jane laid a hand on Max's arm and made an effort to smooth past the awkward moment, "That's awesome that you have such a supportive roommate, Will! Most straight guys are idiots about stuff like this."

"Tell me about it," Will agreed with a grateful smile. He shot Max a

reassuring look as he continued. "Yeah, Mike's always been supportive. He's told off more assholes on my behalf than I can count over the years. We've been best friends since Kindergarten."

"That's *really* cool," Jane replied, impressed. "He sounds like a great friend."

"Yeah, he is!" Will nodded in agreement. "He'll be back in a second. He's just getting drinks."

"Will *really!* I am SO sorry. I shouldn't have asked that!" Max piped in again, her eyes wide, her embarrassment clearly killing her.

"It's fine!" Will reassured her, "I'm just relieved you guys are cool about - " he gestured around him. "About *this*. About *me*. I was... really worried. I promise! I'm not offended at all!"

"Who offended you?!"

A voice called through the cob webs directly behind where Will stood. A hand holding a red drink cup appeared through the cotton batting. Will took the cup as the person fought through the cob webs to join them.

"Nobody! I told Max and she's so cool about everything but she thought you and I were together!"

"What else is new?!" The person that Jane could only guess was Mike said as he finally fell through the thick obscuring cob webs, stumbling a bit as he did so, and -

- in an instant... Jane's brain jammed.

Breath catching in her chest, her eyes traced up past tall black boots to a handmade black lace-up doublet peeking out from the sweep of a hooded cloak. A red plastic cup was in his hand, its bright hue serving a stark contrast to the ruggedness of his delightfully intricate costume. A sword sheath rested atop his hip. His hair was combed straight. Not fluffy like it usually was, and it worked to showcase his dark eyes. Eyes which were, by the moment she reached them, stitched wide and surprised upon her.

*Michael.*

Or, it dawned on her, all of it coming together so dizzyingly fast...

*Mike.*

"Max, it's fine!" Will continued. His voice sounded so very far away.  
"Really, we get it all the time, but Mike's – "

" – Straight." Mike blurted out loudly, his eyes never leaving her. "I mean! Um! Not that that would be *bad* if I wasn't but I, I'm uh... yeah. I'm... straight. You're *Arwen*."

He stated it as a fact, no hint of a question in his voice at all.

Jane nodded involuntarily, the corners of her lips sliding upward in to a shake hint of a smile, though she was not aware of their movement. She could sense the awkwardness in the air. The frozen moment. Will's laughing gasp of '*she is!*'. Max confused stare. Yet, Jane's foggy drunken brain could only process one thing. It beat through her mind like a pulse as she neglected to look away from the source.

*Michael. Mike.*

*Michael. Mike.*

"*Arwen!*" Will exclaimed, one second or one hour later, knocking her from her stupor. His nervousness seemed long gone. A thick and gleeful laugh had taken its place. "*You have to meet Aragorn!*"

He gently pushed Mike toward her.

Her eyes swept his costume once again, faster this time.

*Aragorn...*

Yes. He *surely* was. He was a spitting image, but for one thing. The nervousness at the depths of his eyes... so very much the same as Wednesday before he had stuttered and hurried away.

*Be nice, she reminded herself fretfully.*

A soft sense, drunk and tickling, whispered traitorously inside of her mind...

*Nice might not be too difficult. Not tonight.*

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Part 2 is right on the heels of this! Coming swiftly ;)

## 4. Chapter 4

*Happy Sunday, readers! Just a light trigger warning - this chapter includes underage drinking and 1989 period-typical homophobia. It also contains more nerdy references to LOTR than I ever thought I'd right, so prepare yourself for that, as well.*

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The name *Arwen* bandied through the drunken folds of Mike's mind like an unexpected song, his heart thrumming to its beat in a wild and warbling pattern that he could not seem to control.

*Jane...*

...The blue lights of the room fell upon her in a way that made her seem to glow, her appearance absolutely perfect as though she had stepped out of a dream. Her long brown hair cascaded in soft waves against her shoulders, complete with a thin lace of braids around the crown of her head. The point of her ears peeked out, pale against her dark hair, serving as a sign that he could not ignore. Her dress was far too lovely for a tacky college party, open-necked and flowing with soft maroon velvet and belled sleeves, her long skirt dusting the wood paneled floor.

She looked *beautiful*...

She *had* to be a hallucination. Could alcohol *cause* hallucinations? Mike thought not. Yet, that only left one option...

She was *real*.

His feet finally found their footing from Will's rudely insistent push, stopping directly beside her. She looked up to him, her expression filled with wide eyed surprise. She carefully tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

Her *elf* ear...

*Oh. God.*

"What's Erwagorn? I don't speak nerd," Max Mayfield's voice drifted

in, hardly breaking through the din of his mind.

"Aragorn and Arwen, they're..." Jane paused. She raked his costume down and up... "They're from the same book..."

*...Well, that was putting it lightly, but probably best to leave out the details...*

When she finished her scan, her eyes landed directly upon his. Gone was the shrewd intensity that her gaze always held. Instead, she greeted him with warmth. "Hi, Mike."

Mike gulped. Hard.

This would be the moment. The moment when his tongue would turn to stone. The moment when he would back out of the room, shy away, run, do anything that he could to avoid the surge of heat that was sliding up his face. Yet... in the presence of his intoxication, that urge did not arise. His thoughts felt looser somehow, unhinged from the laws that had governed his lifelong awkwardness in the face of beautiful girls.

"Hey, Jane," Mike replied. Her name fell from his lips with a bizarre ease, a breathless smile arising as he did so.

"Do you two know each other?" Max asked.

Jane bit her lip.

"Wait!?" Will cried, "Oh my God! Are you *JANE Jane*?"

***Goddammit Will Byers?!***

Mike crashed to Earth. His heart flipped from a tipsy song to a red alert alarm. He shot a string of shocked daggers in Will's direction.

A snap of nervous confusion creased Jane's brow. "Does my reputation precede me?" she asked trepidatiously, glancing from Will to Mike.

Mike sputtered - "No I – !"

"No, it's a good thing!" Will replied with enthusiasm, reaching out for her arm, *completely* unaware of the drunken mess he had stirred. "Mike says you wipe the floor with everyone in that class!"

"What class...?" Max cut in.

Jane shot Mike a searching glance. Then, she took a weirdly deep breath before saying, "Political Science," in a hesitant tone.

Max gasped, "Mi-?!" Yet she never finished her word. For, with a record speed that caught Mike completely off guard, Jane clamped down upon Max's wrist like a vice, twisting it ever so slightly in a way that made Max yelp. "Okay! Okay!"

Jane spun back to Mike in an instant. Her features contorted into a wide forced smile that Mike could only characterize as...frenzied? "I like your costume!" she said quickly, high pitched, odd... "Did you have it handmade?"

"I - uh - "

"His Mom made it!" Will offered, all smiles.

"*Will!*?" Mike blurted with a shock.

"What?!" Will retorted. "She did a good job!"

Max guffawed with an intensity that made Mike want to die.

It seemed to make Jane bounce on the balls of her feet, her attention flitted

quickly back and forth between Mike and Will. "Um - How's your night so far?"

"Oh, you know, other than freaking out before you got here, good!" Will said, oblivious. So oblivious to what he had just done - "Are you guys sure you're fine staying at this party?"

"Oh, we are *definitely* staying!" Max exclaimed, her exuberant attention grazing over Mike. Jane's face tightened as she twisted Max's wrist again - "I mean! Just that the music is good!" Max added

as she flinched. "And - " Max turned over her shoulder and scanned the growing crowd in the room. "Just look at everyone's costumes! They're all great!" Then, with a snap shift of attention, Max gasped with glee and yelled -

"Simon?!"

Jerking her hand from Jane's grip, Max waved to an unseen person in the crowd.

"Simon!"

Everyone in their small circle followed Max's yell and Mike, *desperately* grateful for the rapid shift in topic, took the opportunity to gather his wits. Staring at the back of Jane's head, he fought through his drunken haze to make sense of the moment. Of the heat rising off of his flaming cheeks. Of Max's focused laughter and Jane's odd behavior and Will's drunken neglect to understand a single consequence of his words. *Of Jane's presence at all...* Taking a deep breath, he looked into his cup, not surprised to find his knuckles white against the red plastic, holding it so tightly as to leave a dent. The red liquid ungulated to the beat of the New Order tune that was blasting through the room. He took a drink to steady himself, and then another, gulping faster than was rationally intelligent, intensely grateful for the relief that it brought.

When he looked back up, wiping his mouth in a clumsy and roguish manner, he found that he was no longer the only person who looked like they wanted to drown themselves in their drink.

...Looking like a completely different man than he had just a few seconds before, Will stared into the crowd with abject fear. Confused, Mike followed Will's gaze and, as a person approached, he almost choked on the final sip of his punch.

"You look fucking terrifying!" said... *Beetlejuice*, the very same who had caught Will's eye earlier in the night. He joined their circle and pulled Max into a tight wobbly hug. He was only a few inches taller than Max, fit despite his short stature, with caramel toned skin and sparkling eyes that delighted in Max's scandalized look.

"Shut up!" Max gabbed back, giving him a quick squeeze before she stepped away to inspect his costume. "You look too good. It's weird! Beetlejuice is supposed to be creepy!"

"Well, I'm sorry that I'm too attractive for this costume!" Beetlejuice, or *Simon*, joked dramatically as he modeled for Max, "It's a curse, I know."

Will shifted quickly on his feet beside Mike.

"*Simon!*" Max cried, grabbing his arm and carelessly pointing around the circle. "These are my friends! This is - "

But Simon was a step ahead of her. "Max, why couldn't you wear a cute costume like Indiana Jones here instead of scaring the shit out of everyone?" Simon reached out and ran his fingers against the brim of Will's hat with a confidence that seemed to make Will lose his breath on the spot.

"I'm not as fashionable as Will, he's an *artist*," Max said with a dramatic flair of her hand.

"Ohhh," Simon replied, pulling back his hand, shooting Will a look of approval, "An *artist*."

Even through the blue light Mike could spot Will's face flaming with an intensity he had never seen before. Pupils blown in either terror or love at first sight or... both?

"Will and I went to high school together," Max continued. "Will, this is Simon. We sit next to each other in psych. I think his commentary is the only thing that makes the lecture bearable."

"Aww, what a compliment! Thank you!" Simon said. He held out his hand to Will. "Hi."

"Hi..." Will replied quietly, shaking Simon's hand in a hesitant manner.

"Anyway, why are you standing here? You should be dancing!" Simon said, tugging on Max's arm to join him.

"You guys want to go dance?" Max asked the group with a quick scan.

Mike gave no thought to his instinct. "I'm okay, but Will loves to dance!" He said with firm confidence, pushing Will lightly by the back in the *exact same way* that Will had done to Mike just moments before, the motion *clearly* karmically deserved.

Will shot Mike a scandalized look.

"Yeah, come on, Indy!" Simon called.

"I - "

But Will had no more say in the matter. Max latched onto Will's arm and turned to Jane. "Jane, you coming?"

In a completely unexpected reply, Jane vehemently shook her head. "No. I am *not* drunk enough to attempt to dance in this dress," she said with a laugh. "You have fun."

Mike's whole body swooped in surprise.

"Riiiiiight..." Max exclaimed with a laugh, her eyes raking Mike one more time.

"You two look gorgeous by the way!" Simon called back, his attention jumping between Mike and Jane. "Such a good couple's costume! I love The Princess Bride!"

"Uh..." Mike choked.

Yet, there was no time for a reply. For, with a wave, Simon pulled away, tugging Max along, who pulled Will, making him stumble away with the look of a man being dragged to the gallows, leaving Mike and Jane with nothing but each other and Simon's words hanging in the air...

Watching them leave, Jane sipped her wine cooler.

Mike's fingers tightened harder on his cup, his breath short.

"Well... that was awkward," she finally said through gritted teeth,

shooting Mike an abashed glance.

"Uh," Mike stuttered again.

"I mean... imagine looking at us and thinking this is *The Princess Bride*," Jane added, a smirk growing on her lips, "Completely embarrassing for him."

Mike couldn't believe the laugh that crested through his chest at her response, a release of tension so intense that it made him light in the head. She smiled almost gratefully in reply, a hint of relief swimming in her eyes, before she took another big swig of her drink.

Mike gulped down the rest of his as quickly as he could. It did not feel like nearly enough...

"Are you sure you don't want to go dance?" Jane offered, stepping out of his way to the makeshift dance floor. "I can keep myself company."

"Oh...oh no!" Mike replied emphatically, waving his hands in the air to brush off the idea, "I um... If you thought that last interaction was awkward then you definitely don't want to see me dance."

"Okay, fair." she said with a laugh. She looked at his costume again. A peak of curiosity creased her brow. "So, are you actually Aragorn tonight? Or is this more of a Strider costume?"

Mike's eyes widened.

*What a question.*

"Um... It's supposed to be Aragorn. Well, it used to be Aragorn, I guess," His fingers wrapped around his dark cloak in a fumbling manner. "But it's gotten beaten up over the years. So yeah, maybe I'm Strider now?"

"All for the better, really," Jane replied with a shrug, "Strider is the most interesting part of his character. Might as well embrace it, right?"

"Wh - "

"You know," she continued easily, "Mysterious. Rough. Unknown. Humbly ranging the edges of The Shire despite the fact that he knew he was supposed to be a King..." she trailed off, catching a look in his eye with a wary glance. "What?"

*Oh God... How had he been looking at her?*

"You - you know the books well?" he managed to ask.

She shot him a deadpan look and motioned to her outfit with an obvious flair, "I'm standing here in a full length custom-made elf dress, with ears. You expect I wouldn't know the books?"

Mike seethed, scratching the back of his neck with a nervous tick. "No! I - Sorry! I just - I don't think I've ever met a girl who's even read Lord of the Rings, let alone one who's an actual fan."

"Well, I'm more than happy to break that stereotype for you," she replied, a daring twinkle in her eye. "Honestly, though, my Dad read me the books in utero, so I didn't really have a choice. My parents are huge nerds. They're honestly out tonight as Samwise and Rosie."

"Whoa, really?"

"Yeah, they really get a kick out of those costumes. I can't tell you how many times I was dressed as a baby hobbit as a kid."

"Aww, they dressed you as Elanor?"

Jane's eyes narrowed onto Mike for the slightest moment, "...Yes. You *really* know your Tolkien."

"A bit..." he admitted. A fresh frisson of nervousness cut through his body at her tone. The ghost of his sister's voice whispered admonishingly in his ear, warning him of the perils of revealing his dorky knowledge in a mainstream space, returning the slightest sense of freeze to his tongue.

"Which one is your favorite book then?" Jane asked, not following his sister's advice in the slightest.

"Um... Fellowship? Yours?"

"Oh, mine is definitely Two Towers," she said with a definitive tone. She held her hand up before Mike could reply, "- And do *not* tell me it's a weird favorite. I already know that."

"I... wasn't going to say that!" Mike said quickly, "It's a great book."

"Oh!" she chuckled, rolling her eyes at herself, "Sorry! Everyone always gives me shit for it. It's just that its the book where Eowyn is introduced and, well, I love Merry and Pippin with the Ents. They were my favorite growing up. I mean, *how* can you not love the Entmoot and the -"

And then, she *expounded*. The Entmoot spun into her favorite allegories, which shifted to the political ramifications of Théoden's bewitchment, which spun off into a comically detailed analysis of Eowyn's character arc, all in a rapid fire way that Mike could hardly believe. Taken aback, Mike stayed quiet, only interjecting every now and then, his every addition to the conversation effectively spinning her off onto another tangent.

It was just like listening to her in class, his attention rapt upon her in the very same way. Yet this time he could understand every word she said, every single nerdy word... *and he was living for it*. This gorgeous little elf worked with expert precision to pull them down a Middle Earth rabbit hole, her eyes sparkling, her shoulders bopping to the music and her words slurring with drunkenness in the cutest softest ways she did so.

Mike lost himself in her words as the room filled to the brim. She shuffled closer to him as more bodies crowded the space, her arm brushing his once the press of bodies pushed them back up against the wall. All the while she never missed a beat... until suddenly, mid-sentence, she seemed to snap out of a trance.

"Oh my God!" Jane cried. Her hand slapped over her mouth. She looked at Mike with wide shocked eyes. "How long did you let talk?!"

"A while..." Mike admitted with a chuckle.

The embarrassment that bloomed from her was so endearing and relatable that Mike almost reached out to console her. She squeaked,

biting her lip, her expression searching his. "I'm so sorry! Was I even making sense?"

"It's okay! You were making complete sense."

She dropped her head against the wall and closed her eyes with a tight abashed squeeze, laughing at herself as she did so. "Ugh... you were so nice to listen to that. Once I get started like that I can't stop."

"No! It was interesting!" Mike said reassuringly. "I promise! And I mean, you know, as Treebeard would say, never say anything unless it's worth taking a long time to say. And you *definitely* took a long time to say that, so it was probably worth it."

Jane laughed - and *oh god* did she have a lovely laugh - tinkling and light. Floating along the air like it was a part of the music itself. She hazardly peeked open one eye in his direction. "I wasn't speaking in Old Entish though so I don't really know if that wisdom applies here..."

Mike shrugged, feeling looser than he had all night, "Listen, I was just trying to help you feel like less of a dork."

Jane eyes popped open, shocked and unexpectant. "Hey!" she cried through a laugh, unleashing a light punch to his arm.

Mike flinched in surprise, his hands instantly in the air. "I'm kidding!"

Jane's laugh faded off after a few more giggles. "Well, thank you for trying to save me from my own nerdiness. It was a valiant yet hopeless pursuit."

It hurt Mike's cheeks, the smile that popped to his lips.

"I'm surprised that you're Arwen, though, after all of that," he said. "You uh - You seem to really like Eowyn."

Jane cringed and ducked her head with a renewed sheepishness. "Oh, I have costumes for both," she admitted. Then, she leaned toward him as though she had a secret. Looking up directly up into his eyes, she playfully reached for her ear, her arm brushing the length of his as she did so. "I just can never pass up the chance to wear elf ears," Her

lips creased up with a languid ease, "...Can you blame me?"

Mike felt heat rise up his entire body.

"No." he managed. "Not at all."

---

Jane was drunk. She *had* to be. It was the only explanation. For, as her fingers wrapped around her stupid wax ear and she looked up into Mike's dark eyes, so very close to her side, almost lording over her on account of his height, she felt herself slip effortlessly across the line.

She was *flirting*.

Which, she surely should *not* have been doing. Yet in her increasingly inebriated state... it was hard not to.

Jane had always found Mike handsome. Unique and unconventional, catching her eye more than she'd cared to admit. But tonight? With the roguish quality of his costume and the dancing intensity of his eyes as she prattled on about one of her favorite things (for *much* longer than was rationally necessary)? It was easy to forget that she had ever held any negative thought for him at all. He seemed so *nice*, at least in this alternate reality that she had found herself in. And the way he had begun to *look* at her. His pupils blown with a warm grin... it probably just meant he was drunk, but it made her skin hot nonetheless. And she *liked* it.

Jane had no idea how much time had passed since Max and Will had gone to dance, or how long her drink had been empty. She just knew that spending the night sucked into conversation with a handsome Aragorn was proving to be a desperately good way to forget her worries for the night. She made a note to thank Max later, *if* she could forgive her for almost blowing her cover at first.

"I think we lost our friends!" Mike said loudly, his eyes breaking from a simmering lock with hers to scan over the pulsing crowd.

"Oh," she said, her fingers releasing their hold on her ear. "Do you want to go find them?"

He looked back to her, "Uh..." - *It was odd how much she wanted him to say no* - "Maybe we can go get more drinks?"

"Sure!" she nodded, "Drinks! Let's go."

"Okay!" Mike nodded happily. His hair waved across his brow as he did so, its tips curling at the ends from the now stifling heat of the room. With a quick smile, Mike gestured forward and began to lead the way through what was now a thick crowd.

Jane followed Mike to the door and out into the hallway, which was just as sardine packed if not more. Exuberant people and costumes filled each inch in their voyage to the kitchen. The bodies pressed her in a way that she truly did not enjoy and, in reply, she found herself pulling closer to Mike's back as they fought through. His height and trim build worked toward his advantage as he weaved through the fray.

When they finally reached the kitchen, Jane stopped in surprise. It was the one room of the house that was bathed in bright normal light, and in its sheen Jane became instantly aware of her drunkenness. The fuzz around her eyes, fading everything at the edges. The buzz in her ears. The -

"Punch?!" Mike cried, cocking his head to the crowded table of drinks. She looked up to him. The white light of the kitchen showed the heavy flush of his skin, dotted with freckles across the bridge of his nose. His brow was shining with a hint of sweat from the heat of the crowd, his eyes dancing between hers in anticipation of her answer.

"Jane?" he asked curiously. "You okay?"

"Oh yeah!" she blinked. "Sorry. I'll take punch!"

Mike nodded, disappearing quickly to the crowded counter. Jane stayed behind against the wall, the smash of bodies unappealing in every sense of the term. A few minutes later, he came back. Juggling not two, but three drinks.

"Here," he said, bending forward to unload his hands into hers, "You

looked like you maybe needed some water."

Jane smiled gratefully, "Thank you!" she said, the water glass moving to her lips in an instant. Indeed, she *had* needed it. She finished the glass in one large set of gulps.

"Do you want to go find our friends?" Mike asked, motioning toward the door.

Jane nodded, her eyes a little clearer. "Sure!"

Mike smiled and led the way from the kitchen, Jane hot on his heels. The press of bodies seemed almost more intense as they went the other way, giving her the uncomfortable sensation that they were now swimming upstream. It made her take a deep breath, the heat only growing with every minute. She pushed up her sleeves in an attempt to cool.

Without warning, Mike stopped in front of her, making her bump into his back. He looked into a room on their left. The cobwebs had been pulled from the doorway throughout the night, giving them a straight shot to peek in.

Mike tensed and made a noise.

"Is everything okay?!" she called up to him.

He turned and looked back at her with wide eyed shock. He yelled something down to her that got lost between their heights and the surge of the music.

"What?!" she cried back, raising on her toes to hear him better.

Mike leaned down close to her ear, his breath against her skin a surprising sensation. "Over there!" he called, pointing to the back to the room, "I found Will! But he uh... Um - Yeah - "

Jane peered into the red-lit room with squinted eyes. It was little less populated than the rest, and much more of an intimate atmosphere, to say the least. She scanned the faces, a good amount of them not visible as they pressed against others. Eventually she spotted Will's fedora, tipped far to the right of his head, his face obscured... by a lip

lock with Beetlejuice.

"Oh!" Jane squealed, looking up at Mike. "We should probably leave them alone!"

"You think?!" Mike bellowed with a laugh.

Someone jostled Jane hard from behind as they passed. She wavered. "Can we go outside?" she called up to him. "It's so hot in here! This crowd is insane!"

"Yeah!" Mike called back agreeably. Without hesitation, he re-entered the stream of bodies in the hallway, this time leading toward the front door. They continued to get knocked around, each foot forward a growing challenge. Jane tried to get herself to breathe steady as her nerves began to fray, now keeping so close to Mike that she was almost touching his back. Just before the door, an errant elbow shot into Jane's side, causing her to heave forward. Like a latch, Mike reached behind him and steadied her by the forearm as she rammed into his back.

"Sorry!" she cried.

"It's okay! Are you okay?" he called back over his shoulder, his fingers still wrapped around her arm.

"Yeah! Thank you!"

And with that, they reached the door. The chilly night air hit her skin with the deepest relief as they finally escaped.

"Sorry," Mike said, dropping her arm quickly as he turned around, giving her an apologetic look, "It was just so crazy in there. I didn't want to lose you."

Jane smiled gratefully. "It's okay! I'm just feeling a little faint," she looked around. "Can we stand over there?" she pointed toward the empty edge of the front steps, their openness calling her name. Her feet gravitated toward them before Mike even replied, but she felt him follow nonetheless. She stopped at the pillar at the top of the front stairs, leaning into it with relief. The night was almost icy but it felt glorious against her burning face.

The sidewalk directly in front of the house was busy now, drunk students stumbling here and there as they made their way from party to party in the growing dead of night.

Two girls dressed as Fraggles tried to pass behind Mike as he stopped. Mike apologized, making space for them by hopping down to the stair below where Jane stood and pulling himself to the railing. "Are you feeling better?" he asked, now at her eye level.

"I just get a claustrophobic sometimes," she admitted. "This is better."

"Oh! Do you need more water or anything? I can go back and - " he looked... worried.

"No. I'm fine!" she reassured him, surprised by his attention. "I just need some space and some fresh air. This is better."

"Oh okay, good," he replied. The soft lights of the porch played on his features as he zeroed in on the side of her head. "Oh, um," Mike said, pointing, "Your ear is coming off."

"Oh!" Jane griped, "Thank you." She reached up, her fingers fumbling uselessly against its loosened hold.

"Here, can I -?" Mike offered, reaching up hesitantly.

"Oh sure, thanks," Jane said with a nod. A secret smile coming to her lips, she tilted her ear in his direction. He held his drink out to Jane before he laid his fingers on her ear, moving against her ear with a clear lack of knowledge of what the hell to do. She stared with amusement at his focused expression as he made the attempt.

"I don't think it's going to - well, shit," he said with a wince. He gave her a sheepish look as he pulled his hand away, revealing her wax ear in his hand. "I uh - I hate to be the one to tell you this," he said guiltily, "but I think you're a half elf now."

Jane laughed and rolled her eyes. "I'm already a half elf," she hummed, attempting to bite back her smile. "You should know that."

"Touché," Mike conceded, his expression one of playful regret, "You got me there."

*He had such pretty eyes. Rich and deep. Light dancing in their depths -*

"There you are!"

An arm slipped around Jane from behind. She jumped in surprise. Max leaned into Jane, laying her head on her shoulder with the slightest bit of a stumble. "I've been looking for you everywhere! Will is inside making out with my friend!"

"Oh we know!" Jane replied emphatically. "We ran into them!"

"I was just dancing and I turned around and - Bam! Totally wasn't expecting that!"

"Oh, I was," Mike said with a snicker, taking his drink back from Jane's hand. "He was eyeing Beetlejuice earlier before you two got here."

"Really?!" Max exclaimed. "Wow! I would *not* expect Will would be one to pounce like that."

"He's not!" Mike confirmed. "I'm pretty sure that's Will's first kiss!"

"Really?!" Jane and Max yelled in unison.

"Oh shit," Mike grimaced. He gritted his teeth guiltily, "I probably shouldn't have said that."

Jane squealed, clapping her hands. "Oh, that is so sweet! I mean I never would have pictured Beetlejuice and Indiana Jones, but it works!"

"Right?" Mike replied wryly. "Indiana Jones and the Handbook for the Recently Deceased."

At that, Jane burst into laughter, the full kind. The bell ringing kind. The kind of sound that filled the small front porch in a way made people turn their heads.

"Okay, *wow*," Max replied, eyeing Jane almost warily. "What have you two been up to?"

"Oh!" Jane exclaimed, her smile big and painful against the chilly night, no longer aware enough to care about the underlying gossipy question in Max's eyes. "We were talking about how I'm a half elf because my ear fell off, but I already was a half elf because I'm Arwen and she is a half elf so - ."

"Okay! Nevermind!" Max cut in with a laugh as she shook her head. "I'm sorry I asked! You two have fun with your adorable nerd talk!" And before Jane could get another word in edgewise, Max flitted away.

Laughing, Jane turned back to Mike with a guilty look. "I think I scared her off."

"Yeah, seems like it," Mike said with a bit of surprise, his eyes still following Max as she disappeared into the crowd on the other end of the porch.

"I've learned tonight that Max is very nerd averse."

"She seems cool, though," Mike said. "I've never known her very well but Will was pretty close with her last year. Are you two roommates?"

"Yeah," Jane said. She shook her belled sleeves over her hands, the night chill creeping in. "She was a good get in the lottery. So you and Will are really good friends?"

"Oh, yeah," Mike said, "We've been friends since the first day of Kindergarten."

"Oh wow!" Jane replied. "Your friendship seems really cool, by the way. It's nice to see a straight guy be so supportive."

"Oh, he's one of my best friends," he replied modestly. "We've been through almost everything together. He'd do the same for me."

"Sure," Jane continued, "but it's cool that you don't mind seem to be bothered being mistaken as gay. Or that you live with him. Or geez, even that you came to this party. So many people are afraid. Or they're stupid enough to think that they'll catch AIDS by breathing the same air as anyone who's gay. It's such bullshit. It makes me so

mad."

"Yeah, I definitely get what you're saying. That's all bullshit," Mike agreed. "I guess it's easy, though. I'd be on his side over all those other assholes any day. We uh -" Mike paused for a moment, hesitant, searching her for a moment before he continued. "We went to school with the same bunch of assholes all through school. It was a small town so we never really got away from them. People were shitty to us all the time so we always had each other's backs. I'm not going to stop now that he's out."

Jane's heart warmed at his words. "You sound like really good friend, Mike."

He seemed taken aback by the compliment. "I don't know about that, but thank you."

Jane smiled. She fell silent as she regarded him. The music was no longer booming, and they were no longer having to yell, but Jane couldn't dismiss the realization that she was still standing so close to him, now for no other reason than that... it felt good?

He *did* seem like a good friend. A good person. Kind. Thoughtful. Safe...

...Not a single adjective she would have used to describe him even a few hours before.

"Hey," she said, the words bubbling from her chest with drunken important urgency. "I'm uh... I'm sorry if I was an asshole to you on the first day of classes."

"Oh..." Mike replied with a wide eyed rush. "I - No! It's okay..."

"It's not," she continued, holding her hand up make sure she could get out the words. "I can come on too strong sometimes. I get really excited and I, well, I might have jumped the gun with you. I just -"

"- know twice as much as the rest of that class combined?" Mike offered with a smirk.

Jane winced, "Am I really that bad?"

"Oh no! That's not what I meant!" Mike cried, shaking his head in an apologetic manner, "I just meant you're really really smart. I've definitely learned more from you than the professor."

Jane almost stumbled from the unexpected compliment. "Thank you... He is kind of an idiot, isn't he? I can't wait until I get to the higher levels of the major so I can phase out of his classes."

"Oh, is that your major? Politics?" he asked.

"International Politics," She corrected.

"Oh wow. That's cool! Not that it surprises me. You seem to know more about the subject than anyone I've ever met. That's really cool, though."

"Thank you," she said, her cheeks heating for reasons that had nothing to do with the temperature. "What's your major?"

Mike was quiet for a split second, almost as though he didn't know how to answer. "It's uh... me... Creative writing!" he said, stumbling over his words. "I write."

"Oh wow!" Jane replied with interest. She crossed her arms as a breeze blew past. "What kind of stuff do you write?"

"Fantasy, mostly," he said with a modest shrug, the corners of his lips turning up in a fresh smile. "I guess that's kind of obvious, maybe. I don't know. Will and I have been working on a fantasy style comic series since, well... since forever I guess, but seriously since our Junior year. He draws and I write. But I write other stuff too. I'm researching the start of a big project right now. I'm reading a bunch of new books to get some world building ideas."

"That sounds awesome!" Jane exclaimed. "I'd love to read it sometime."

"Oh!" Mike balked, his lips struggling to reply in the most endearing way. "I uh - Yeah! Okay! Yeah! Maybe sometime!"

"Cool," she said, she tightened her arms around herself further.

Mike's smile fell from his lips as he regarded her movement. "Are you cold?"

"A bit," she admitted. She looked over her shoulder. "Maybe we should go inside? But ugh, it's stifling in there. There's no middle ground."

She turned back to find Mike setting down his cup on the base of the short railing. "Here." he said, unlacing his cloak from around his neck.

"No, but then you'll be cold!"

"Oh, I'm still hot," he said reassuringly, "It was a nightmare in there. Really, I don't know how you cooled off so fast. Here." He reached forward to drape the dark heavy fabric over her shoulders. Accepting the chivalry, Jane pulled her hair out of the way as he settled it on her shoulders. He fidgeted with it, a thread of focus creasing his brow as he worked to center it on her shoulders just right.

Jane bit back a giggle.

"There," he said, satisfied, looking up to her. "Better?"

"Better," she murmured, the weight of his hands on her shoulder making her stomach bubble with something she didn't want to name. "Thank you." Catching herself, she pulled away, fashioning the cloak like someone would in a magazine, looking off to the side in a dramatic stance. "How do I look?"

"Pretty."

Jane's gaze snapped back to his in surprise.

Mike's eyes were wide. "I- I mean your costume is really pretty and this uh... this really sets it off! Your costume is really pretty."

Jane's smile was involuntary and completely uncontrollable. "Thank you."

He smiled with a hint of relief at her reply.

"Oh look! It's the feminazi!"

*Of course.*

Jane saw the rise of Mike's eyebrow before they both turned to the sidewalk a few feet in front of the step. Adrenalin spiked in Jane's blood, mixing with her intoxication in a way that made her stomach lurch.

Standing at the base of the walkway was the absolute last person that Jane ever wanted to see.

Brandon wavered on his feet, hulking in a football jersey, lazily holding a helmet by the face guard between his fingers.

"Brandon, let it go." A friend beside him said, but he didn't listen. Taking long strides, his eyes glassy and locked on Jane, Brandon stepped forward.

"Dude, you need to go." Mike said, turning fully away from Jane to face Brandon.

"Oh! And she's with the queer!" Brandon added, a thick slur to his words. "What? Is this a fag party?" He lazily scanned the porch, taking in the costumes. Jane heard the voices behind her fall silent as his presence on the porch became known. "Holy shit, this is a fag party!"

Jane's teeth gritted hard. "You need to leave," She said firmly. With a rush, she stepped to the center, planting her feet to block his way.

He stepped up one step, directly beside Mike, his height matching Jane's on the step above. He reeked of booze and something worse that Jane cared not to deduce. His face was pockmarked, flushed and a little bruised, as though he had been drinking for days. His watery blue eyes locked on hers as he leaned in dangerously. "What, are you and your loud mouth are going to stop me?"

"Clever," she said, her voice a deadpan threat. Her body buzzed with anger, weeks old, quickly unspooling within her lack sobriety. "Now leave."

"You think you're so tough for such a tiny little bitch," he spat, wetness hitting her face.

And at that, something happened that Jane did not expect at all.

Mike, matching Brandon in height but half his weight, threw himself into a full fledged push against Brandon's shoulder.

**"Don't you - !"**

But Mike never finished his sentence. For, like whiplash, Brandon swung back.

**"Don't FUCKING touch me - "** he shouted from the gash he called a mouth as he revved up like an engine and smashed his fist directly into Mike's face.

Mike launched off the steps from the force, crumbling into the grass like a feather.

Her rage within her roared in an instant, snapping against her usual barrier and finding it long gone. With a scream and an instinctual thrust, Jane kneed Brandon directly in the groin with all of her might. He howled in shocked pain as he stumbled off the step and fell to his knees, scraping hard against the concrete.

**"You fucking bitc - !"**

He didn't finish his sentence. He couldn't. For, Jane had had the chance to free her foot from beneath her skirt, and, launching off the step, her drink careering to the ground, she attacked again. She kicked into his groin one more time with so much force that he fell over and curled into a pile on the ground.

*"How dare you come here and try to ruin everyone's fucking night, you piece of shit!"* Jane screamed, her body emanating pent up anger with a force that made her vibrate. *"Get him the fuck out of here!"* she bellowed at Brandon's friend. The guy lurched forward, obeying her without delay. Jane watched with a face of stone as the new bane of her existence got carted off with his injuries she had caused, but she didn't take much time to savor the win. Instead, her eyes darted to a dark huddle in the grass.

Her focus seemed to sharpen in a rush. It was as though something in her body overrode the alcohol, leaving her with a snap of cold, hard sobriety.

She moved toward Mike and dropped to her knees beside him.

Mike was on his side, his face pressed half into the grass. It was a solace that he had fallen at such an angle, for just a few inches in either direction and his head could've fallen on concrete or smashed into the corner of the railing. He was covering his face, his breath seething through his teeth.

"Mike? Can you hear me? Are you okay?"

He groaned at the sound of his name and eased himself onto his back with effort, opening his unaffected eye. He looked up at her, his expression mixed with surprise and pain. He was quiet for a moment, just staring into her face. A grass stain streaked across his cheek, a trickle of blood apparent by his temple.

"Are you okay?" he finally croaked to her.

Jane, taken aback, almost laughed in surprise. "Yeah. I'm fine. He's gone. You're bleeding. We need to get you cleaned up."

A murmuring crowd had gathered on the front porch, but it was only Max's voice who Jane could hear.

"Here! To help with the swelling." An unopened icy can of beer was thrust into Jane's hand. "Who the fuck *was* that?!"

Jane didn't answer her friend. She was too focused elsewhere. "Here, hold this to your eye," she said, placing the can to his face.

Mike flinched at the cold, but did as she said, lying back into the grass as he did so.

"Max? Can you go find Will?" Jane called over her shoulder with procedural focus. "Mike really needs to go home."

"No - Will's busy." Mike said in feeble protest. "Just tell him I'm - I'm going home. I'll just - I can..."

Jane sat stunned as Mike climbed clumsily to his feet.

"Mike! Just wait for Will!"

But Mike was already close to standing, hunched, holding his face. "It's okay." He said with garbled words. He took a few unsteady steps toward the sidewalk. "I'll be okay."

Jane looked back at Max, at a complete loss. "I -" she sighed. "Go find Will and let him know I'm making sure Mike gets home. I'll meet you at home," And, with a nod from Max, Jane pulled herself up.

With what felt like the stone cold clarity of a girl who had never had an ounce to drink in her life, Jane lifted her skirt and trotted quickly to the sidewalk, and him.

---

Everything had been going well. So well. *Too well, clearly.*

Mike knew without even thinking about it that that hour, or two hours or five, that he had spent with Jane was his favorite thing that had happened since he'd ended up at IU. With her animated expressions and whip smart sense of humor. She had laughed at his jokes... she had actually seemed *interested* in what he had to say...

A girl like *her*, interested in what he had to say...

A girl like *her*, smiling like a brilliant star when he accidentally called her pretty... quelling his fear in an instant and exploding his chest in a way that he ventured to guess he'd never felt before...

Of course it ended up with him eating grass and almost losing his eye after getting called a queer.

That was fitting.

*Fuck.*

Mike stumbled up and attempted a quick goodbye, too delirious to really make sense of what was up or what was down. He walked clumsily, his face pulsing in dizzying pain, his body bubbling with growing shame. He tried to watch his feet with his good eye to as he

reached the dark concrete.

He hardly noticed the soft footsteps that trotted to his side.

"Where do you live?"

Mike stopped and looked up to find Jane standing beside him. Her expression was nothing like it had been just moments before. Gone was the easy lightness of her gaze. In its place was the shrewd calculation that he had gotten so used to seeing every Monday and Wednesday morning.

"It's okay," he said, shaking his head though it hurt to do. His eyes trained back onto the ground. "I can get home. I- I don't want to ruin your night."

"You didn't ruin my night," she said emphatically, "That asshole homophobe sexist piece of shit ruined my night! He ruined yours, too. You can't go home alone like this. He's still out and you're bleeding and stumbling like a hobo. Where do you live?"

"I - "

She caught his arm, "You're my poli sci partner and I need to ace that class so I can't have you dying because you passed out in a ditch or something. So, I'll ask you one last time. Where do you live?"

Mike spied her from his squinting eye. She hooked him with an air of complete conviction. Mike let his guard fall.

"Humphrey."

"Easy," she said, "It's right next to mine. Follow me, we're taking a short cut."

She tugged him to the left, down a dark alley.

"I can't believe that fucking asshole punched you in the face," Jane grimaced. "He has no idea what the hell he's just gotten himself into."

Mike didn't know what she meant by that, but he couldn't find it in himself to focus. He was having too much trouble putting his feet in

the correct direction, the darkness of the alleyway catching him on rocks from the gravel path.

"What h-happened?"

"Oh right, you would have missed that part. I kneed him in the groin."

"Holy shit..." Mike said weakly, wincing at the way his eye creased as he did so.

"And then, when he was down, I kicked him in the groin again. I wish I could find my combat boots because I would've done a lot more than just knock him to the ground. God, I fucking hate that guy. It felt so good to floor him."

...Somewhere in the depths of Mike's mind he made a mental note to never get on this girl's bad side...

It wasn't long before the alleyway spit them out directly across the street from Mike's dorm in a short cut he wouldn't have known to take. The road was almost silent, which was good since he stumbled twice more as he crossed.

Jane reached the front door of his dorm and stopped quickly, right in front of him.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, "Can you get upstairs okay?"

His mouth said yes, but his legs decided to buckle a bit then. To her credit, Jane laughed. "Well, that answers that," she said, her voice a bit lighter as she steadied him by his arms.

"I'm so sorry..." he whined, the pain welting in his face but, to be honest, most intense in his ego.

"Hey, don't be sorry," she said, her hands still steadyng him by his biceps. "You didn't punch yourself in the face, did you?"

"No..."

The alcohol or the shock or the combination of it all was getting the

better of him. Everything melded together a bit, fogging his brain in the darkness, as her hand carefully guided his back toward the front door creaked as she opened it and the stark lights of the lobby flooded over him, making him cringe. He shut his one useful eye against them and surrendered to her as she led him along.

"No girls allowed after 11pm," he heard a guy say with bored annoyance.

"Trust me," Jane said forcefully, sounding stone cold sober, "Nothing out of order is happening. He got punched in the face. I'm just trying to help him."

"No girls after 11pm," the voice repeated more firmly. "Sorry."

Jane growled in annoyance. "Fine. Can we at least sit in the common room?"

"What? Whatever, fine."

Jane tugged on Mike's arm and he followed, his eyes still closed against the bright lights. Before he knew it he was sitting on a hard and unforgiving sofa in the common room off of the lobby. The weight of Jane sitting down next to him made him waver until he felt her hand upon his wrist.

"Let me see your face," she said softly.

Mike grimaced as he pulled the cold can away, revealing his injured eye in a way that made him feel dizzier than any moment before. He eased his good eye open to find Jane leaning close to inspect him, her focus solely on his injury. The scent of her hair hit his nose in a way that surprisingly made a tiny piece of him calm.

"Shit, you're still bleeding," she said quietly. "Was he wearing a ring or something? Fucking asshole." She pulled away, looked behind her shoulder, and leaned back close to him, whispering this time, "Whats your room number?"

"220," he said with no hesitation.

"Oh good," she replied. "You're upstairs. That'll be easier. Follow my

lead, okay?" She tugged lightly on his arm, guiding him back up to standing. She positioned him against the wall directly near the door. Her voice stayed a whisper, close to his ear, little rushes of breath against his skin as she spoke. "Stand here. It'll just be a second."

Mike chanced a curious glance as Jane walked over to the telephone in the other corner of the room. She picked it up and ran her finger down a list of numbers taped to the wall on green paper. Typing in three numbers, she dropped the receiver and let it swing, hurrying back to the doorway, her hand latching onto his arm as she peeked out of the doorway.

A phone began to ring a bit of a ways away. Curious, Mike looked out too, leaning over her as he did so, his chin almost resting on her head.

The phone at the lobby desk rang three times before the attendant turned away from them to pick it up.

"Humphrey Hall..."

"Now!" Jane hissed. She grabbed Mike's hand and tugged him through the doorway, moving them to the recessed staircase just a few feet away as quickly as Mike was able to move. Pulling him around the corner, she traversed a few stairs and stopped, catching Mike's eye with a finger to her lips.

It was an instant concealment, now perfectly shielding their entry.

Moving as quietly as she could, she led the way up the stairs.

The thought was foggy as he climbed the stairs, but a tired delirious smile flitted to his lips. He couldn't deny the vision of it all, with his throbbing eye and his buckling legs and his ranger costume, his arm being pulled along by a beautiful elf as they broke into a building. It felt like quite an unusual adventure, indeed.

Heartened by the craze of the moment, Mike's clarity clicked in a bit and he found it in himself to make better use of the stairs, only stumbling slightly as they reached the second floor.

"Right or left?" she whispered.

"Left."

Jane turned left, not slowing down, not dropping his hand until they reached his door.

"Keys?" she asked, her tone procedural. She dropped his hand.

Mike leaned against the wall in a lazy manner as he fished into his pocket, his hand buzzing from the loss of her touch, the cold metal of the keys seeming sharp against his skin. He pulled them out and simply surrendered them to her. She unlocked the door quickly, shuttling him inside.

His hand went for the lights, fumbling against the wall until he found the switch as Jane shut and latched the door.

It was the click of the lock that brought in the full rush of reality into Mike's mind. Mike's blood pressure rose as he turned to the door and spied Jane, **Jane**... leaning against the locked interior door of his dorm room.

*Oh. God.*

He found his voice, though it sounded too high. "It's uh... very chivalrous of you, but really didn't need to bring me home."

Jane smirked at his choice of words and sighed, taking a confident step into the room. "Someone needed to help you and you were dumb enough to run off before we could find Will. Do you have a first aid kit?"

"Over by Will's desk in the box on the floor, I think."

"Take a seat," she said with a sense of authority, as though he was in her room. A shiver of nervousness compounded with the cocktail in his veins, but he followed her directions and sat on his bed, unmade, unprepared for the reality of the moment.

All the while, Jane rummaged around Will's desk. She seemed to find the small first aid kit and a gallon of water that Will kept for sleeping. She poured a glass and she crossed to Mike's bed, standing before him and holding out the glass.

"Drink this," she said, "You need to sober up."

Mike obeyed, taking the glass from her fingers and letting the water slide through his parched lips. Only upon the water hitting his tongue did he realize how desperately he wanted it. He finished the glass in record time.

"Thank you," he gasped as she took back the glass. She set it on the table by his bed and took a seat on the bed beside him.

"How hard did you hit your head?" she asked, her voice light yet focused.

"I – I don't know."

"Well, how much did it hurt when you fell?"

Mike snickered. "I was pretty focused on getting punched in the eye, so I'm not sure."

"Yeah okay, smartass," she replied with a chuckle, "Just let me check something."

And then Mike experienced the biggest shock of the night, and that... was saying something.

Jane pulled herself directly to his side, her knee digging into his thigh as she lifted her hand and moved her fingers into his hair. Mike froze, his jaw dropping, his eyes falling shut at the absolutely wonderful sensation. Softly, her fingers ran against his scalp, scraping her nails here and there as she seemed to search for something.

"I'm just trying to see if you bumped your head," she said quietly as she even moved closer to him, her voice hardly above a whisper because it didn't need to be given the intimacy of her closeness. "Do you feel sleepy or dizzy or anything?"

"...No"

He lied. He was *very* dizzy, but he was sure that it had nothing to do with hitting his head...

Her fingers carded through his hair to the other side of his head. "I don't feel any bumps or anything. I don't think you have a concussion, but - " Jane's hand threaded out of his hair but he didn't lose her touch. Her fingers fell softly to his wrist by his eye. She lightly pulled his hand from his face, removing the beer can in the process. Mike could hardly see her through the eye that she surveyed, a bad sign, yet he could hardly find it in himself to care about the injury. Leaning ever so close, Jane surveyed him, biting her lip with concern as she took in the damage.

"How bad does it look?" he asked.

"Who's asking?" she replied with a hint of playfulness. "Mike or Aragorn?"

Mike chuckled. "Both."

"Well, Mike," Jane said. She reached behind her and came back with an alcohol pad. "You're going to have a gnarly black eye for a week or two." She ripped the package open. "But," she continued sweetly, her fingers moving to his injury, amusement on her lips. She chanced a glance to his eyes. "You faced an Orc tonight, Strider. This look suits you."

The sensation of Jane calling him Strider caused a shiver to run down his spine that almost served as a painkiller.

"You were the one that vanquished that Orc, though." he said thickly.

"Good teamwork, then." she replied thoughtfully. She fixed his gaze, her honey eyes shining. "Hold still. This might hurt a bit."

"I'm ready."

Mike fought back a wince from the sting where Jane applied an antiseptic pad. He fell silent as she focused on her work.

*This part surely had to be a dream. She sat so close to him that he could almost feel her breath upon his cheek. A serene focus owned her as she worked, her fingers intent yet delicate in their movements against his face. The tiniest line of concentration creased between her eyebrows. Somewhere in the fray her braids had become loose,*

slipping down one side of her head, making her look wonderfully off kilter in combination with the single pointy ear that stuck out of the right side of her hair.

She discarded the pad quickly and unwrapped a bandaid, her fingers coming back again to the arch where his eyebrow met his temple.

Never in a million years would he have thought that he would see Jane like this. So close, sitting on his bed, tending to his wounds like the elven healer that she seemed to be.

"Thank you," he said, his voice struggling to work. "For helping me. You're being really nice."

Jane paused for a second before she giggled with an odd amusement, her fingers featherlight against the edge of his eye as she pressed into his temple and he felt the band-aid stick. "Don't sound so surprised that I'm being nice."

"I didn't mean that." Mike retorted weakly.

"Well, don't worry, it won't last," she said with a faux seriousness as she reached down for a second bandaid and peeled it open. "It's just the elf ears. They have glamour properties. Just a spell. I'll magically switch back from a sweet Elven healer to a raging Feminazi by class on Monday."

Mike snickered, wincing as his bruising eye crinkled.

"Don't move!" she cried softly, her fingers back to his face. "You're messing up my work!"

"Glamour properties..." he repeated, fighting the urge to shake his head.

"What?"

Mike couldn't contain his laughter, light and tired and dizzy and smitten. "That's just the nerdiest thing I've ever heard a girl say in my entire life."

Jane's smile grew, her fingers softly sweeping three times on a spot

against his forehead. "Are you complaining?"

"Not at all," he said, his voice heavy with something he had not been able to hold back.

Jane froze, her eyes meeting his with a hint of surprise. Her fingers ever so subtly stopped their movement against his face, the touch feeling like static against his skin.

Mike knew how he was looking at her. His intoxication had left him bereft of the ability to get his eyes to lie. And in that moment, he couldn't find it in himself to care.

Mike would have done the whole night over again one thousand times, punch to the face and all, if it had brought him here, to taking in the golden flecks that piqued within her eyes as she looked into his, the precious dimple that creased upon her cheek, the sensation of her breath, quick, so quick, pulsing close enough that he could feel it...

"Um..."

Jane stiffened. Her eyes darted to her fingers as they revved back up their moment, patting the bandaid to top of his cheek. "Okay, you're all set." She pulled her hand away quickly, shifting to sit forward on the bed, no longer touching him in any way.

Mike's breath shot out of him, the moment cracking like a shock.

"I - I should go..." she said, her voice high, her breath pulsing in inconsistent airy huffs. "You'll be okay?"

At a loss, Mike looked over to her. The natural part of her ear was five shades more red than the wax tip. Her eyes were grazing the floor, seemingly intent on looking at anything but him. He tried to make sense of the moment, but shame piled onto his chest in a torrent.

"I'm s -"

But then, out of nowhere, Jane gasped.

"Is that - Is that the second *Heralds of Valdemar* book?!" She leaned down and picked up the book, which he had stashed on the floor by his bed.

"Uh... yeah? Do you know it?"

She turned the book over in her hands with increasingly hungry eyes.  
"Have you read the first one?"

"Yeah, I finished it earlier this week. *Have you?*"

She looked at him with wide eyed curiosity. "I just finished Arrows of the Queen earlier *today...*"

"Really?! That's crazy."

"Yeah!" she said, her prior lightness rushing back to her face in an instant, "What did you think of it?"

Smiling, smiling so hard it almost hurt, Mike said, "It was great! I mean, maybe it was a bit um... what's the word...?"

"Derivative?" she offered with a smirk.

"Yeah, maybe it as a bit derivative but it was a really well done story for the genre. I'm about halfway through that one now."

"Really?" she said, looking back down at the book in her hand. "How is it so far?"

"Good!"

"Oh, I can't wait to read it." she said with longing.

"Take it!" he offered in an instant. "You can borrow it."

Jane stopped, looking up, an almost guilty look in her eye. "But.. you're not done with it."

Mike shrugged. "I'm definitely not reading tomorrow," he said, motioning to his eye, completely lying through his teeth. "You can get a head start."

"Okay... um... thank you!" she said, her smile suddenly brilliant. "I'll hurry. I'll bring it to you in class Monday."

"You don't have to read it that fast."

"No, it's fine. This'll be good to read tomorrow while I'm waiting out my hangover." She stood quickly, smoothing her dress in a fumbling manner as she did so. "I should uh... I should go."

"Are you going to be okay to get home?" he asked, rising to his feet, his knees wavering a bit as he did so. "I could... walk you?"

She gave him a soft look before she darted her eyes to the ground. "Thanks, but I'll be fine. You should get some rest. Drink water. Maybe take a painkiller. You're going to be in a shit ton of pain tomorrow."

"I can't wait..." he said with a groan. "I'll uh... I'll see you Monday?"

"Yeah," Jane said with a nod. "Oh, and don't worry about the Orc you fought. I'll take care of him."

"What does *that* mean?" Mike said curiously.

And at that, a sly smile came to her lips. "I have my ways," she said.

She moved through the small room and reached the door.

"Hey, Jane?" Mike called out, almost lunging forward to stop her.

"Yeah?" she asked, turning back to him in an instant.

"Thank you."

"Of course," she said kindly, holding up the book. "It was worth it for this."

"Right. Um, Goodnight, Jane."

Jane stalled for the quickest of seconds, her lips turned up into a final soft smile. "Goodnight, Mike."

And with that, she unlocked the door and was gone, not even giving

so much as backwards glance before the door clicked and Mike found himself alone.

Mike stared at the empty door, not moving a muscle, not wasting a breath. Not believing a single thing that had just occurred...

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*Well, Mike and Jane finally met, it seems! Thanks so much for taking a read. Let me know what you think below or by following me on tumblr at dancingskygreen or Instagram at el\_borealis. I'm going to jump back over to my other fic The Jump next, it's been way too long since I updated that but I'll be back here ASAP!*